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**Unruly Voices: Narration of Communal Memory and the Construction
of Gender and Communal Identity in Assia Djebar's *Far from Madina***

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by

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Dedication

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Abstract

Unruly Voices: Narration of Communal Memory and the Construction of Gender and Communal Identity in Assia Djébar's *Far from Madina*

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

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Assia Djébar's *Far from Madina* retells the stories of the women who appear on the margins of the earliest sources of Islamic history from a contemporary Muslim feminist's perspective. Djébar uses formal elements of early Islamic historiography and relies upon classical Sunni sources. These techniques place her novel in conversation with classical Islamic tradition and bring legitimacy to her subversive project which aims to shift the boundaries of that canon. Though crafted in relation to classical sources, Djébar's critique of gender identity is also addressed to the discourses and institutions of Islamic authority that evolved over the centuries and that continue to delineate narrow roles for women, up to and including contemporary regimes. In chapter one I argue that by grounding her critique of circulating discourses on Muslim women within a project that appropriates canonical Sunni historiography, Djébar refuses the disjunction between feminism and Islam, critiquing normative Islamic discourse on women in contemporary Algeria without framing the conflict in terms of an East/West or a religious/secular

binary. Chapter two examines Djébar's treatment of Fatima in particular. I consider Djébar's selection of classical sources and compare the earliest canonical Sunni renderings of Fatima and those found in the novel. I argue that the vision of empowered women in the first Muslim community posited in *Far from Madina* destabilizes the ideal of gender identity constructed in early Islamic historiography. *Far from Madina* focuses on the moment after the death of Muhammad when Muslims were left to interpret their scripture and recall their Prophet's words and deeds. Djébar constructs the novel around the question of what role Muslim women would play in this process, a move which foregrounds her own choice to write the novel and embrace her role as witness and transmitter of the stories of these early women. Chapter three examines the reflexive character of *Far from Madina* and considers how Djébar's narrative strategies and hermeneutical approach facilitate the articulation of identity through difference. I argue that the narrative is Djébar's performance of contemporary Muslim identity and an example of "lived Islam."

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Scholarly treatments of Djébar's work	6
Theoretical genealogy	16
Chapter I: Situating Djébar's turn to early Islamic history within the context of a contemporary critique	30
A biography of Assia Djébar	32
<i>Far from Madina</i> and modern Algeria.....	34
Positionality and multiple critique	38
Orality, the storyteller, memory	44
Returning to the Islamic past	51
Chapter II: Re-imagining ideal Muslim women: the case of Fatima bint Muhammad	56
Framing the novel <i>Far from Madina</i>	58
Classical Sunni sources.....	60
The biography of Fatima bint Muhammad	68
Textual comparisons	71
Multivalent relationships in the novel and in the Islamic past.....	86
Chapter III: <i>Far from Madina</i> , a narration of female Muslim identity through the principle of difference.....	91
Muslim communal identity	92
Female Muslim identity in <i>Far from Madina</i>	98
Authorial reflexivity.....	103
The narrators of Madina.....	108
Linking Aisha bint Abi Bakr and Assia Djébar	119

Conclusion	128
Bibliography	134

Introduction

This study examines twentieth-century Algerian writer and filmmaker Assia Djébar's (b. 1936) engagement with literature as a vehicle for challenging normative forces in the discursive construction and social circumscribing of Muslim women, with emphasis on the Algerian context. Assia Djébar has said that the "true topic" of her writing and filmmaking is an exploration of women's "relationship to the question of memory."¹ As such, her work confronts the fact that mainstream historical narrative has largely failed to preserve Algerian female voices and perspectives and instead has tended to put forward representations of women that have had a marginalizing effect. Djébar's project addresses this marginalizing influence in multiple layers of historical narrative pertaining to Muslim women. The canon of classical Islamic writing is marked by a tendency to relegate the voices and experiences of women to the margins of their narratives, a problem that pervades early historical writing as a whole. Colonial histories have tended to exoticize Muslim women and to depict them as disempowered or lacking agency. Algerian national discourse, emerging in the milieu of the legacy of colonialism, has tended to appropriate women as cultural markers in the battle between secular and Islamic ideology. And thus, much of its rhetoric has revolved around the articulation of a narrow view of female agency in keeping with a proscribed model of cultural authenticity. Confronting these dialogues, Djébar's project is both recuperative and

¹ Clarisse Zimra, "When the Past Answers Our Present: Assia Djébar Talks About *Loin de Medine*," *Callaloo* 16:1 (Winter, 1983): 124.

critical, endeavoring to restore a view of women's agency in these layers of historical narrative and interrogating literary constructions of women therein.

Djebar's aim is to advance a broader understanding of women's agency in historical narrative of the Arab/Islamic world and to open in discursive space a wide horizon of possibility for female Muslim identity. As she articulates narratives that explore connections between women and memory in the Algerian context, Djebar must negotiate the tension between her own commitment to gender equality and the fact that critiques on women's status in Muslim society are often equated with the forces of Western cultural imperialism. Further, Djebar must confront the "othering" tendencies of language and the fact that normative narrative structures are inadequate for the work of representing the vision of female Muslim subjectivity and identity she seeks to express. Faced with these challenges, Djebar constructs her account out of strands of indigenous history and utilizes narrative techniques that problematize binary oppositions that typically form the foundation of discourses on meaning and identity. Djebar combines feminist recuperative historical research and a reflexive mode of narration in a transparent process that foregrounds the constructed nature of official histories and discourses. Further, Djebar embraces fiction for the project of recovering lost female voices and for the informed improvisation of personal histories which she positions to speak back to official discourses. Finally, she calls upon juxtapositions such as the scribal/oral, factual/improvised and author/text to highlight the fact that the stories she narrates resist fixed, final representation.

Assia Djébar's *Far from Madina* offers a rich case study for examining how modern literature of the Arab/Islamic world serves as a location where historical narrative is negotiated and gender and religious identity is constructed. In this so-called novel, Djébar revisits the literary representations of the women of the first community of Islam in the medieval works of Ibn Ishaq (d. 761) and Ibn Hisham (d. 835), Ibn Sa'd (d. 785) and al-Tabari (d. 923), three of the earliest Sunni historiography sources.² In an attempt to remedy the chroniclers' tendency to be "habitually inclined to let any female presence be overshadowed" in their description of events, Djébar brings her literary and creative capacities to bear on this raw material. Djébar's narrations "recreate" female figures whom she considers to be "women of substance."³ Djébar's attempt to recuperate female subjectivity in this context has consequences for the resulting representation of female agency and thus the conception of gender identity in early Islamic history. Djébar's text emphasizes "the initiative these women exhibited" and their physicality, thus recovering a version of history that finds in the first community of Islam, an active collective of "women of the Verb."⁴ By utilizing formal elements of classical Sunni sources, Djébar places her text in the tradition of the Sunni canon while simultaneously producing a counter narrative that challenges its authority, its boundaries and its finality. The work confronts classical Islamic authority and its narratives and institutions of control by

² As will be clarified at greater length later, Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham are credited as authors of the same work, the famous, earliest Prophetic biography. Ibn Hisham's recension is the only surviving version of Ibn Ishaq's work.

³ Assia Djébar, *Far From Madina*, trans. Dorothy S. Blair (London; Quartet, 1994), xv and Clarisse Zimra, "When the Past Answers Our Present: Assia Djébar Talks About Loin de Medine," 127.

⁴ Clarisse Zimra, "Not so Far from Medina: Assia Djébar Charts Islam's 'Insupportable Feminist Revolution,'" *World Literature Today* 70:4 (1996): 824; Zimra, "When the Past Answers Our Present," 126.

exposing the constructed nature of these discourses and seizing upon the creative right and the moral imperative to produce alternate constructions. The novel's trajectory destabilizes not only constructions of marginal female Muslim identity in seventh-century Arabia, but also the legitimacy of constraints on women that derive from them, including twentieth-century re-articulations of Islamic authority. Further, Djébar's narration of historical fragments demonstrating that women were active agents in early Islam not only restores their voices to the record of that historical moment, but also challenges contemporary Western/colonial constructs of Muslim women as universally oppressed.

In *Far from Madina*, as in much of her corpus of work, Djébar blurs the boundaries between historical narrative, fiction and autobiography and subverts the fixing and narrowing tendencies of language in order to vocalize and inscribe notions of identity that are not fixed or final. Rather than posit a particular, alternative version of the past, this multi-voiced narrative forcefully undermines the legitimacy of unified, hegemonic forms of discourse. Djébar retrieves fragments from the historical record, draws upon her creative forces to address the ruptures and silences from which they speak, and renders those memories through the physical act of her writing, a process that amplifies the historical agency of those women. Djébar's endeavor is to maintain a truthful relationship to the women whose stories she conveys; and as such, she does not attempt to obscure the fact of her partial knowledge, acts of fictionalization or conflicted relationship with language. Nor does she force closure or false unification on these encounters. Instead she narrates, weaving voices and themes in a manner that can be described as musical or cinematic. The resulting polyphonic narrative opens up the

possibility for the representation of traces of identity that do not conform to the logic of unified narrative.

For Djebbar, a non-linear narrative approach is not strictly an aesthetic choice, but rather the modality necessary for the project of representing the fractured experiences of colonial occupation, the trauma of war, the female subject position and the position of exile. In addition to that, the task of representing Islamic history and a vision of communal identity calls for a critical and creative use of language in order to subvert the tendency of language to posit fixed ideas of the past and reproduce normative structures for apprehending it. Among the conventions that underlie the will to invest a particular view of the past with authority is the notion that historical narrative is a presentation of facts discerned by a qualified, objective researcher. Djebbar's body of work challenges the notion that the author can be extricated from that which she writes. *Far from Madina* is Djebbar's response to a personal calling to retell and reinterpret the stories of the women of Islam's earliest days. It is this purpose that gives the work its reflexive nature, guiding the author to acts of fictionalization and creativity in order to bring these women to life and to articulate a vision of the past looking out from their eyes. For Djebbar, seeing and envisioning are themselves modes of engagement that are integral to her personal narrative of Islamic identity and inform both her sense of communal belonging and feeling of exile. In Djebbar's work, a truthful relationship to memory is a fluid one that is constantly revising itself, and a truthful narrator is one who is conscious of the fact that narrating her relationship to the past constructs social meaning. It is my argument that Djebbar's text elicits the understanding that identity is performed through the practice of

narration and that ultimately the connection between women and memory is meaning, or identity itself.

SCHOLARLY TREATMENTS OF DJEBAR'S WORK

Djebar's literary body of work has received extensive critical attention. Scholarly analysis has examined Djebar's texts as postcolonial,⁵ feminist,⁶ and historical⁷ works. Treatments have also focused upon autobiographical elements⁸ of Djebar's novels, her writing as a form of resistance,⁹ and language issues ranging from her status as a Francophone writer¹⁰ to the musicality¹¹ of her language style. Of the scholarly commentary that has addressed Djebar's *Far from Madina*, Clarisse Zimra's work has contributed most extensively to my research. Zimra's published interviews with Djebar and her analysis probing the novel's relationship to the present, the author's treatment of sources and the author's approach to particular representations constructed in the text offered immeasurable value to my project of. Zimra's work also provided insight on the

⁵ Anne Donadey, *Recasting Postcolonialism: Women Writing Between Worlds* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001); Mildred Mortimer, "Edward Said and Assia Djebar: A Contrapuntal Reading," *Research in African Literatures* 36:3 (Fall 2005): 53-67.

⁶ Jane Hiddleston, "Feminism and the Question of 'Woman' in Assia Djebar's 'Vaste est la prison,'" *Research in African Literature* 35:4 (Winter 2004): 91-104.

⁷ Mildred Mortimer, "Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade," in *African Literature and Its Times*, eds. Joyce Moss and Lorraine Valesuk (Detroit: Gale Group, 2000), 163-172 and Hafid Gafaiti, "The Blood of Writing: Assia Djebar's unveiling of women and history," *World Literature Today* 70:4 (Autumn 1996): 813-822.

⁸ Mildred Mortimer, "Assia Djebar's 'Algerian Quartet': A Study in Fragmented Autobiography," *Research in African Literatures* 28:2 (Summer, 1997): 102-117.

⁹ Joyce Lazarus, "Writing as Resistance: Assia Djebar's *Vaste est la prison*," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 11:4 (May 2010): 83-96.

¹⁰ Clarisse Zimra, "In Her Own Write: The Circular Structures of Linguistic Alienation in Assia Djebar's Early Novels," *Research in African Literatures* 11:2 (Summer, 1980): 206-223.

¹¹ Marjolijn de Jager, "Translating Assia Djebar's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*: Listening for the Silence," *World Literature Today* 70:4 (1996): 856-858.

relation of *Far from Madina* to its potential audience as well as to Djébar's broader body of work.¹² Further, Zimra's biographical writings on Djébar, as well as her independent translations of excerpts of the author's French texts, are important sources which have informed my research.¹³

My study builds on the work of scholars who have previously examined how Djébar's texts produce multivalent critique originating from plural, unstable perspectives and locations of identity. Miriam Cooke includes Djébar's *Far from Madina* as a work belonging to the tentative category "Islamic feminists," a polymorphous women's movement whose members embrace Islamic identity as "symbolic capital" while engaging in critical evaluation of Islamic authority on the topic gender equality and women's issues. Cooke explores the risks and rewards of this positionality. On the one hand, women risk being labeled traitors in their own communities; and on the other hand, they are afforded multiple opportunities for correcting discourses that have tended to marginalize them in the Arab/Islamic world as well as in the West.¹⁴ Valerie Orlando presses forward to explore the creative and productive potential of Djébar's historical novels focusing on how they engage in forms of postmodern de-centering. Orlando posits that as a committed, female author in exile, Djébar writes from a position in "militant space." Rather than taking an oppositional stance in relation to Western discourse on Islam or Islamic discourses on women, Djébar intermingles historical

¹² Zimra, "Not so Far from Medina," 1996; Zimra, "When the Past Answers Our Present," 1983.

¹³ Clarisse Zimra, afterword to *Children of the New World: A Novel of the Algerian War* by Assia Djébar, trans. Marjolijn de Jager (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2005), 201-233.

¹⁴ Miriam Cooke, "Women, Religion and Postcolonial Arab World," *Cultural Critique* 45 (Spring 2000): 150-1. Also see Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

archives with postmodern narrative techniques in order to destabilize and re-contextualize those master narratives.¹⁵ To clarify further, Orlando holds that Djébar's texts should not be defined simply as reactions to the discourses they respond to, but instead should be seen as producing new discursive space. Orlando holds that Djébar's narratives present views on the past looking out from deconstructed, destabilizing vantage points and that these new, multi-perspectives have the potential to undermine the legitimacy of linear discourses.¹⁶ Like Cooke, Lindsey Moore considers the problematic nature of associating the term 'feminist' with the work of Djébar and a wider set of female Arab, Muslim writers due to the legacy of colonial discourse on Middle Eastern women. Like, Orlando, Moore is interested in how authors who are concerned with advancing women's causes write from a contested, unstable position. Moore's study focuses on such authors' approaches to representation and the way that their texts are constructed given their consciousness of the structuring power of the gaze and the subject position of the author.

17

Lindsey Moore also identifies an important lacuna in critical treatment of the literary works of Arab, Muslim women in the realm of postcolonial studies, namely the fact that Muslim identity has not been thoroughly treated as a category of analysis for these writers' texts. She states:

Religious faith as an identity category...remains barely conceptualized in postcolonial studies, particularly when we compare it to the purchase which ethnicity and nationality and modes of marginality, mobility and hybridity have in

¹⁵ Valerie Orlando, *Nomadic Voices of Exile: Feminine Identity in Francophone Literature of the Maghreb* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), 15.

¹⁶Ibid., 58-65.

¹⁷ Lindsey Moore, *Arab, Muslim, Woman: Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature and Film* (London: Routledge, 2008), 8-9.

the theoretical field. Spiritual quest narratives remain critically uncharted territory for the most part and perspectives perceived as secular tend to be privileged in the publishing domain in terms of describing women's literature and visual media.¹⁸

It is the goal of my project to contribute to the response to this gap in scholarship and to approach Djébar's *Far from Madina* from the perspective that among the mosaic of identifiers that are central to its character it must be seen as Muslim text.

The preference for the secular that Moore points to is readily discernible in Evelyne Accad's treatment of Djébar's *Far from Madina*. In an article reviewing Djébar's body of work, Accad traces Djébar's trajectory of development as her narrative focus shifted from primarily personal narratives in her novels of the 1950's to overtly engaged, social commentaries written in the 1990's.¹⁹ Affirmative of what she sees as Djébar's endeavor to restore voice and agency to textually under-represented Algerian women, Accad is critical of the idea that the Islamic past offers a potential context for realizing revolutionary goals. She posits that *Far from Madina* hinges on a contradiction. The narrative and title suggest that liberation requires that one "leave tradition and its enslavement," a step that characters of the novel do not in her mind succeed in taking.²⁰ According to Accad, the novel points to this untaken roadway at the same time that it glorifies that past and the models found therein. Near the end of the novel the narrator of *Far from Madina* muses, "What if Aisha, one day, were to decide to leave Madina?" a question that Accad quotes, taking it to mean that "The final message is that one ought to

¹⁸ Ibid., 47.

¹⁹ Evelyn Accad, "Assia Djébar's Contribution to Arab Women's Literature: Rebellion, Maturity, Vision," *World Literature Today* 70:4 (Autumn, 1996): 801-812.

²⁰ Accad, 810.

leave Medina.”²¹ It seems that Accad is not attuned to the fact that the historical Aisha²² would indeed leave Madina when the community was drawn into civil war, a highly controversial act. Djebbar leaves this undertaking on the horizon and chooses instead to place the action of the novel in a suspended state where anything could have happened. Aisha would play a leading role in challenging the leadership of the fourth caliph, Ali, after the murder of the third, Uthman. She would be present at one of the two main battles of the first civil war, serving as the symbolic center of the Battle of the Camel. Djebbar chose not to focus on this overtly revolutionary aspect of Aisha’s biography or on the events of the civil war generally. This is perhaps because she did not want the controversy of those events to drown out the subject that she truly wished to engage.

It is not typical for Djebbar to posit a linear course of resolution to the conflicts presented in her later texts. Accad is generally sensitive this, but on the topic of the Islamic past, her reading is decidedly deaf to such nuance. Accad misses the sense permeating the text, that the Madina longed for was symbolic of a conception of Islam that is radically fluid and resistant to fixed representation, and further, that the distance inscribed in the phrase “far from” alludes to the fact that discursive regimes of interpretation and definition have cut off the inhabitants of the physical city, who are representative of the wider community of faith, from this type of relationship to Islam. Perhaps lack of knowledge of Islamic history impeded Accad’s endeavor to consider the

²¹ Djebbar, *Far from Madina*, 275; Accad, 810.

²² Aisha was one of the Prophet’s wives, daughter of the second caliph, Abu Bakr, and an important narrator and authority on hadith. She will be discussed at greater length in chapter three. Accad’s discussion of *Far from Madina* contains another oversight in regards to Aisha whom she groups with Fatima as a woman who brought Islamic history to life in the novel but who died soon after Muhammad. While Fatima did die about six months after her father, Aisha lived another forty-five years. Ibid., 810.

text on multiple levels, or perhaps as Moore has pointed out, the failure to consider religious identity as mode of hybridity and alterity may be at the root of this reading.

From a different trajectory of analysis, Winifrid Woodhull's commentary on *Far from Madina* also reads the title of the work as suggesting that the resolution of the novel lay in traveling away from Madina. Differently than Accad, Woodhull does apprehend the model of "living" Islam that the text is in search of. She carefully attends to the fact that Djebbar places in Aisha the possibility of narrating the Islamic past with "plural word."²³ Woodhull holds that this project can only be realized if Aisha leaves Madina, or symbolically moves away from the religious orthodoxy that the presence of caliphate authority there points to. Like Accad, Woodhull sees the title of the novel pointing to a failure, unaware that Aisha does later fulfill the suggestion that Djebbar inscribes in the title. It is a problematic fulfillment, a step that surviving reports suggest Aisha deeply regretted, not simply the leaving, but the bloodshed it involved.²⁴ Further, I believe that Woodhull falls short in acknowledging the powerful role that Djebbar sees Aisha's narrations playing in contesting the formulation of Islamic orthodoxy and the interpretation of the past.

Knowing that Djebbar is hinting at a future that does in some sense come to pass, we must look for a more nuanced understanding of what this title might point to. The

²³ Winifred Woodhull, "Feminism and the Islamic Tradition," *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 17:1 (Winter 1993): n. page, par. 6, accessed September 24, 2011, <http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CH1420066468&v=2.1&u=txshrcad2598&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.

²⁴ Nabia Abbot, *Aishah, The Beloved of Mohammed* (London: Saqi Books, 1985, 1998), 171-173; Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1991), 4-7.

narrator of *Far from Madina* asks, “What if Aisha’s soft voice, the unending flow of her narration, should merge with Fatima’s eloquence in spite, the turbulence of her defiance?”²⁵ Woodhull sees this question as closed. My project however will consider how Djebbar leaves this vision as an open possibility which she realizes transiently through her own narrative linking of these two women’s legacies. Woodhull does acknowledge Djebbar’s project as one aimed at de-centering mainstream narrative and its discursive power. However, she fails to see that Djebbar’s relationship to the past holds direct relevance to her contemporary situation and that of Algerian women and Muslim women more widely through whom all such questions remain open and undetermined. My project attempts to establish that link, focusing on how Djebbar’s work does not simply posit a critique of Islamic discourse, but also a creative, affirmation of a particular mode of Islamic identity. My analysis will highlight the Islamic nature of Djebbar’s project of re/claiming identity through acts of narration and solidarity and engage it as lens through which one might apprehend the meaning of her work.²⁶

There is also a body of scholarship that has interpreted *Far from Madina* within Islamic studies frameworks that has contributed to my thinking on this project. George Lang offers the simple yet powerful insight that to apprehend works such as Djebbar’s “requires willingness to engage with the argumentative and interpretive strategies they

²⁵ Djebbar, *Far from Madina*, 275.

²⁶ Kambiz GhaneaBassiri’s approach to studying Muslim communities in early America was an inspiration to me in theorizing Muslim identity as a way of looking out. In that particular study he stated, “When we acknowledge the polyvalence and dynamism of religious beliefs and practices, it becomes apparent that Islam did not shape a distinct Muslim community in colonial and antebellum America but rather was a way through which Muslims made sense of their new experiences and encounters and formed new individual and communal relations.” Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World Order to the New World Order* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), 67.

‘borrow’ from Islamic traditions.”²⁷ In other words, it is not enough to examine this work from a purely secularist or Western gaze. Rather it calls for a reading that is engaged in a wider understanding of the Islamic past and interpretive issues surrounding it. Lang treats the novel as “a fictional application of gender criticism to the primordial family drama of Islam,” and considers this trajectory as alternately an act of *jihad* and *ijtihad*.²⁸ He frames this discussion by contextualizing these practices within the particular discourses in Islamic scholarship that have sanctioned and debated their deployment historically. He then juxtaposes Djébar’s narrative work and overall approach with what he considers a ratiocentric tradition surrounding *hadith* literature.²⁹ Patricia Geesey’s study examines how Djébar models her novel on the *hadith* literary form and utilizes the idea of the chain of transmission, called the *isnad* in classical Islamic scholarship, as a point of intervention for the insertion of female voices in the

²⁷ George Lang, “Jihad, Ijtihad, and other Dialogical Wars,” in *The Marabout & the Muse: New Approaches to Islam in African Literature*, ed. Kenneth W. Harrow (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996), 1.

²⁸ Ibid., 9. Jihad and ijtihad are words deriving from the same Arabic root with a basic meaning: “to endeavor, strive, labor...” Jihad also holds the meaning of inner struggle or to struggle for a cause or alternately, to engage in “holy war.” Ijtihad also possesses the meaning of working for a cause but is more often associated with independent reasoning and interpretation. It has specific meaning in Islamic jurisprudence, differing from school to school and historical moment, but relates to the activity of using reason to discern the meaning of Islamic scriptural tradition. Hans Wehr, *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Urbana: Spoken Language Services, Inc, 1994), 168.

²⁹ There are aspects of Lang’s article that I am not in agreement with. For example, Lang posits that Djébar’s novel addresses the *hadith* canon. Certainly it does on some level, but Djébar states clearly that she is working with different historiographical sources, Ibn Sa’d, Ibn Ishaq/Ibn Hisham and al-Tabari. In chapter two I will inquire into the overlap between these different literary genres. I think that understanding the distinctions is important. Further, Lang considers the nature of this genre to be ratiocentric, and that to treat it as literature would be a bold move. This overlooks the very literary quality of the genre, its history of development, including a history of forgery, the way the tradition collects conflicting reports, etc. It is clearly the case that the *hadith* literature came to be used in a hierarchical ordering of knowledge, but taking this fact for granted as the central quality of the genre is an incomplete picture. Also, Lang’s parenthetical remark that Aisha is “a whore in Shi’ite tradition” betrays a lack of sensitivity to this tradition and cultural milieu. Despite the fact that indeed Aisha is seen as an adulterer in Shi’i literature, Lang’s word choice and paucity of explanation is jarring. Lang, 10.

historical record.³⁰ Ruth Roded's study of *Far from Madina* connects the novel to Djébar's body of work, which she deems "nationalist Algerian counter history," and places it in the context of a wider category of "modern life-stories of the Prophet Muhammad."³¹ Roded's insightful analysis of the work considers Djébar's approach to classical sources and creative use of genealogical information. Sonia Lee offers a close reading of selections from the novel that focus on Fatima and Aisha and highlights how Djébar's narrative presents these incidences through poetic variation in order to highlight the significance they might hold for modern Muslim women.³² Roded's and Lee's studies are in alignment with my project and it is my aim to continue on the trajectory that their insights point to by theorizing the relationship of the novel to modern female Muslim identity.

My research approaches Djébar's project by way of English translations of her writing, a constraint that no doubt places limitations on my access to the author's original intent in her work. My approach to Djébar's novels is mitigated by a foreign language and vocabulary and also through the structuring and interpretation of Western critiques, especially that of her translators. Rim Hassen's comparative study of excerpts from *Far from Madina* in the original French and Dorothy Blair's English translation of it sheds

³⁰ Patricia Geesey, "Women's Words" Assia Djébar's *Loin de Médine*," in *The Marabout & the Muse: New Approaches to Islam in African Literature*, ed. Kenneth W. Harrow (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996), 40-50.

³¹ Ruth Roded, "Recreating Fatima, Aisha and Marginalized Women in the Early Years of Islam: Assia Djébar's *Far from Medina* (1991)," *Hawwa: Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World* 6 (2008): 236, 238.

³² Sonia Lee, "Daughters of Hagar: Daughters of Muhammad," in *The Marabout & the Muse: New Approaches to Islam in African Literature*, ed. Kenneth W. Harrow (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996), 51-61.

light on how language differences such as the existence of nominal gendering in French and a lack thereof in English presents the translator with complex problems in the course of her work as she attempts to balance the fluidity of the narrative with a nuanced translation of gendered, individual and collective identity.³³ My analysis also approaches the original Arabic sources that Djébar used in the writing of *Far from Madina* primarily by way of English translation.³⁴ This fact no doubt further constructs mine as a mediated position vis à vis discourse on the Muslim identity and the Islamic past. These limitations have informed the course of my project to position Djébar's *Far from Madina* in a historical, cultural and political context and to consider the complex levels of critique performed and identity discourses constructed by the text, rather than to attempt language analysis or a close reading of the language text.

Despite the limitations on my project, I believe it is a valuable contribution that addresses a gap in scholarship. This uncharted area is the exploration of *Far from Madina* as a performance of Muslim identity and the consideration of the relationship of this performance to indigenous and external discourses on Muslim identity and modes of representing of the Islamic past. My analysis focuses upon the function of narration in connecting to the past and constructing social meaning. Given the complicated subject position from which Djébar writes, unconventional narrative techniques she employs, and her decidedly deconstructed approach to meaning, I consider the character of Muslim

³³ Rim Hassen, "Translating Women in Assia Djébar's *Far from Madina*," *Palimpsestes* [En ligne], 22 (2009), accessed May 2, 2012, <http://palimpsestes.revues.org/188>.

³⁴ Djébar informs readers that she did seek assistance with the classical Arabic text that she relies upon in the novel. In the forward to *Far from Madina* she thanks a poet, "Nurredine El-Ansari who helped me in my confrontation with the language of these chronicles." More attention will be given to Djébar's relationship to Arabic in chapter one of this thesis. Djébar, *Far from Madina*, xvi.

identity that Djébar's work constructs. Going further, I consider how Djébar's Muslim identity, an unstable field of influences, urges, experiences and inscriptions, informs her writing and produces her text, and how Djébar's narration of the novel constructs a way of seeing.

THEORETICAL GENEALOGY

In approaching Islamic identity as a category for apprehending the subversive project of Djébar's novel, my argument relies on a genealogy of theoretical approaches. The challenge that Djébar's work posed to dominant narratives, particularly from 1979 on, is brought into greater relief when it is situated in the intellectual milieu wherein notions of history, truth, and even identity have been subject to systematic critique. Among the most influential interlocutors of this critical worldview in the twentieth century was Michel Foucault, whose work started from a radical rejection of the notion that human knowledge might be anchored by universal truths, original foundations or final conclusions, and exposed the constructed and interested nature of all forms of knowledge. Foucault held that it was necessary to "disconnect the unquestioned continuities by which we organize in advance, the discourse that we are to analyze." Foucault sought to demonstrate that un-interrogated continuities at once underlie discourse and legitimate it, and to:

show that they don't come about of themselves, but are always the result of a construction the rules of which must be known, and the justifications of which must be scrutinized.³⁵

For Foucault, the assumption of continuity, permanence and sameness over their opposites is an interpretive "operation."³⁶ To consider an object of inquiry outside of such an operation is to approach it as a singularity, "to restore to the statement the specificity of its occurrence," and in discourse, to ask "how it is that one statement appeared rather than another?"³⁷ The sweep of Foucault's critique extended to undermine the grounds of unified subjectivity and identity holding that when followed to its end, this powerful "de-centering," or "will to knowledge" as he calls it in homage to Nietzsche, reveals that any notion of identity is ultimately unstable and multiple.³⁸

Foucault's analysis of the rules underlying the construction of continuities in specific "systems of thought," what he calls discursive practices, reveals their productivity as instruments of power. According to Foucault:

Discursive practices are characterized by the delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective of the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories.

Further, these operations are not limited to speech or writing, rather:

Discursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse. They are embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general

³⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 25.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

³⁸ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *Language Counter-memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 161-3 and Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language*, 12-13,

behavior, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them.³⁹

Foucault argues that the production of discourse and the production of knowledge proceed from power relations. He states that:

power produces knowledge...power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.⁴⁰

From Foucault's perspective, the critique of discourse always involves an analysis of power relations.

Edward Said's pioneering work, *Orientalism*, employed Foucault's framework to explicate the discursive and institutional relationship between European powers and Near/Middle Eastern countries beginning in the late eighteenth century, continuing throughout the colonial period, with ongoing relevance in contemporary history. In the work he argues that not only did European nations control Middle Eastern states through military domination but also by discursive construction of the subject of the Orient itself.

He states:

Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.⁴¹

³⁹ Michel Foucault, "History of Systems of Thoughts, History" in *Language Counter-memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 199-200.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 27.

⁴¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 3.

Said went further to argue that discursively constructed knowledge of the Orient was also a constitutive component of Occidental identity. He states, “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.”⁴² In other words, Orientalism is the manner in which colonial powers perceived and propagated knowledge about Occidental cultures through biased lenses of cultural superiority in such a way as to posit the societies they colonized as in need of Westernization.

Djebar does not explicitly employ the ideas of Said or Foucault, nor does she claim these thinkers as direct influences on her work. Nonetheless, her work carries out these very types of critique and the conceptual framework is useful in elucidating the reach and impact of her writing. For instance, Djebar’s interrogation of the archives of colonized Algeria and early Islamic historiography mirrors the approach to history prescribed by Foucault who called for the re-examination of the historical statement in search of its discontinuity, “the incision that it makes, that irreducible – and very often tiny - emergence” in order to consider unexamined relations.⁴³ While Djebar’s reconsideration of the archive leads to narrative acts that are explicitly creative and admittedly fictional, the fact that they are unconcealed transforms their utility. Rather than concealing a power-knowledge discourse, Djebar inserts improvised representations in order to destabilize such a narrative. Djebar’s art, rather than falsifying, makes

⁴² Ibid., 3.

⁴³ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language*, 28- 29.

possible the project to which Foucault referred: the exploration of the unknown relations of the statements of history.

In articulating recuperated narratives, Djebbar must project her vision across the transom of the complex field of Orientalist discourse described by Said generally, and Western discourse about Muslim women specifically. Another important consideration that must be seen as a backdrop to Djebbar's writing is her understanding of the discursive perils of Western feminist discourses on women from non-Western societies. Chandra Mohanty has critiqued Western feminist scholarship that presents Arab and Muslim women as a homogenous, oppressed group whose status is a given due to their location in Muslim society.⁴⁴ Mohanty argues that research conducted from this starting point engages in "discursive colonization" because it constructs an objectified category, "Third World" women, which serves as the other in a binary framework defined by Western cultural norms that posit Western women as liberated and powerful.⁴⁵ Mohanty insists that inquiry that aims to decolonize must not define women based on their location in social structures but rather show how specific women are "constituted through" the "social relations" of their cultural milieu.⁴⁶ Further, she emphasizes that a woman's agency must be treated as a constructive force if research is to escape "defining women primarily in terms of their objective status."⁴⁷ Deniz Kandiyoti has further elucidated the problem of "ethnocentrism" in Western scholarship on Middle Eastern women,

⁴⁴ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2003), 23, 28.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 22-23, 38.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

highlighting the legacy of Orientalist treatments that tended to both exoticize and eroticize women and harem life.⁴⁸ To guard against these pitfalls, Kandiyoti also calls for research methodology that investigates how particular “social institutions...are the site of power relations and political processes through which gender hierarchies are both created and contested.”⁴⁹

Assia Djebar’s writing about Algerian women and the first women of Islam highlights female agency and attempts to do justice to the complex historical context and cultural background of the world in which her work unfolds. In what follows I will trace how Djebar’s revisiting of historical questions offers the occasion to reconsider the role of female agency. At issue is not simply whether or not women’s agency in seeking liberation is recognized in the narration of events. The framing of historical narrative sets the stage for whether or not women’s status is designated a battleground between the perceived binary of westernizing forces and indigenous cultural authenticity. Djebar’s nuanced and engaged approach eschews this set of choices. Djebar articulates a vision of the Islamic past that is inclusive of female agency while at the same time highlights the constructed nature of female identity in a field of socially created meaning.

When approaching Djebar’s treatment of female Muslim identity, my analysis is rooted in the theoretical paradigm that states that gender difference is a socially constructed phenomenon.⁵⁰ Western discourse on the concept of gender has evolved

⁴⁸ Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., “Contemporary Feminist Scholarship in Middle East Studies,” in *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 12, 16.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁰ Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louis Lamphere, eds., “Introduction,” in *Woman, Culture and Society*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).

dramatically over the last century. Gender has transformed from a term signifying strict biological sex differences to one that refers to the roles and behaviors a society associates with sex differences.⁵¹ An initial shift in understanding made it possible to examine the social dynamics that underlie gender identity. In the 1970's in *Woman, Culture & Society*, feminist anthropologists argued that while the female sex has had a subordinate role across all cultures studied to date⁵² the basis of the inequality was not rooted in biology but was rather the result of social organization.⁵³ Contributors to the volume took up the question of why sexual asymmetry was a universal phenomenon. Notably, Sherry Ortner argued that the devaluing of women's contributions across societies was a result of the association of women with nature rather than culture and with domestic responsibilities rather than production or sustenance.⁵⁴ The upshot was a cogent argument for the social and not biological basis of gender inequality that served as a catalyst for research in many disciplines.

Closely linked to the notion that gender difference is socially constructed is the idea that behavioral norms for women are produced by a discourse that is both disseminated through and regulated by formal and informal structures of society and that confrontation with these norms presents opportunities for renegotiating identity.⁵⁵ My

⁵¹ Elizabeth Povinelli, "Feminist Anthropology," in *The Dictionary of Anthropology*, ed. Thomas Barfield (London: Blackwell, 1997), 181-182.

⁵² Ortner stresses that this is a "universal trait" found in "every known society." Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in *Woman, Culture and Society*, eds. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 69-71.

⁵³ Rosaldo and Lamphere, 5-9.

⁵⁴ Ortner, 69-71.

⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1 An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

investigation will highlight Djébar's texts as sites of contestation where her attempts to undermine normative discourse suggest the importance of approaching identity as an ongoing negotiation. Again, I point to Michel Foucault's landmark work which examined how normative discourse functions in society by both legitimizing institutions, laws and social values and circulating through them to control populations' behaviors. Speaking on the topic of sexuality and gender identity, Foucault argued that while discourse "produces" and "transmits" power relations, the same channels can be usurped to "undermine" discursive authority or to create a "reverse discourse."⁵⁶ Judith Butler's concept of performativity builds on these ideas positing that while normative discourse invests subjects with identity, individuals are always sites of contestation where "identities can come into being and dissolve depending on the concrete practices that constitute them."⁵⁷ My research will rely on these theoretical lenses in examining not only gender but also wider questions of identity formation in order to locate nodes and currents of normative force and to consider the slippages created by Djébar's writings' interactions with them.⁵⁸

Another important argument that underlies my analysis of Djébar's work is that Islamic authority constructs female subjects and that this normative discourse itself is constructed in a hermeneutic process shaped by contingent, culturally derived beliefs. Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* explores the situation of women in the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 101-102.

⁵⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1999) (1990), 21-22.

⁵⁸ At the same time, deployment of such lenses will be tempered by sensitivity to the specific cultural and temporal context of the material under analysis.

societies that were dominant at the time of and in proximity to the rise and expansion of Islam. She argues that because Islam from its inception was seen by the Muslims to be a continuation of already existing traditions, that:

Once Islam conquered the adjacent territories, the assimilation of scriptural and social traditions of their Christian and Jewish populations into the corpus of Islamic life and thought occurred easily and seamlessly.⁵⁹

Ahmed argues that a key feature of the forms that Islam inherited from forerunner faiths and their communities was that they “enjoined the worship of a god referred to by a male pronoun, and endorsed the patriarchal family and female subordination as key components of their socioreligious vision.”

In *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions and Interpretations* Barbara Stowasser argues that misogynist ideology entered into Islamic discourse, social and legal institutions through medieval interpretation by male scholars and did not originate primarily in the Qur'an scriptures.⁶⁰ Following a methodology of comparing Qur'anic passages on women to the related exegetic literature and interpretative discourse, Stowasser shows that Qur'anic passages put forward largely positive images of women based on a principle of spiritual equality. However, a shift can be traced in medieval Islamic scholarship as the Qur'an began to be interpreted through the lens of hadith

⁵⁹ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 4.

⁶⁰ For example, in examining the figure Eve or Hawwa, Stowasser discusses the variety of material that al-Tabari compiled into his exegetical work, which included hadith and qisas al-anbiyah literature that propagated negative images of the female sex. Stowasser observes that al-Tabari withheld judgment on whether these materials and the views contained in them were sound, but compiled them nonetheless. According to Stowasser, once compiled, these materials were available to later exegetes and theorists of law and formed part of tradition. Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions and Interpretations* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 28-34.

literature and Biblically-influenced lore that was compiled into exegetical works.⁶¹ Throughout her study, Stowasser focuses on the way that female exemplars that appeared in the Qur'an were reinterpreted by culturally-conditioned ideology and biblically-sourced perspectives and how the resulting images were then cast back upon the original sacred stories.⁶²

Fatima's Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite* provides another important precedent. This work undertakes a critical examination of the textual traditions underlying power structures in classical and modern Muslim society. According to Mernissi, "not only have the sacred texts always been manipulated, but manipulation of them is a structural characteristic of power in Muslim society."⁶³ Mernissi's analysis examines the historical links between religious authority and political authority focusing specifically on how political interests played a role in the process by which misogynist beliefs were embedded into Islamic tradition with a focus on the figure of Aisha bint Abi Bakr. Mernissi interrogates the reliability of specific hadith material in an effort to impugn its authority, which she argues has been used as a means to limit the political participation of women in the Islamic past and in contemporary times. Djébar's work shares with Mernissi's a commitment to historical critique and the desire to re-

⁶¹ Stowasser looks at the exegetical works of Zamakhshari, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, al-Baydawi and others. Again, in the case of Eve/Hawwa she says "Scholarly consensus ('ijma') supported the tenet of the woman's responsibility for Adam's fall, even though many interpreters continued to follow al-Tabari's example in registering mental reservations concerning the traditions' Islamic authenticity." Stowasser, 30-33.

⁶² Stowasser, 20-21.

⁶³ Mernissi, 8-9.

appropriate the past; however, it charts its own course in adopting an interpretive paradigm that demands continuous acts of revision.

Djebar understands fully the constructed nature of canonical narratives and the systematic way in which women have been marginalized in national, colonial and Islamic history. In responding to these challenges, Djebar draws on a model of women's storytelling culture which is fluid in its approach to factuality and resistant to transmission via the written word. Djebar considers this type of narration equal if not superior in legitimacy to traditional scribal sources of history owing to the storyteller's capacity to narrate the "truth" of a community's past, which is itself also resistant to accurate portrayal in a single, settled narrative. Djebar must confront male scribes' constructions of women of the past in order to revive female voices and with them, a multiple, unsettled view of the past.

It is in addressing this impasse that Djebar arrives at literary treatment as the means necessary to reinterpret the past. Djebar revisits historical narratives with a critical view, questioning the choices that were made in the prior construction and engaging her own narrative capacity to re-imagine scenes where women appeared at the margins, silent or unnamed. Djebar explores such scenes as they might have appeared from the perspectives of the women themselves and considers how events might read if one supposes the women to be active agents rather than passive bystanders. Djebar intends her work to have a destabilizing effect on traditional historical narrative which she firmly believes has no more claim to truth than does her own genre of engaged, historical fiction. By revealing the constructed nature of official discourses she takes as the raw

material of her investigation, Djébar opens alternate trajectories for encountering voices outside marginalizing paradigms of female Muslim identity. By embracing fiction as an authentic mode of representation of the past, Djébar's work suggests that no static apprehension of the past is valid.

Linda Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction" is productive for the task of connecting the framework of Foucauldian critique to Djébar's novels *Far from Madina* and *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*.⁶⁴ Hutcheon coins this term in the course of a wider survey of the poetical features and theoretical underpinnings observed in works of postmodern fiction that she undertakes to identify what she calls the "'poetics' of postmodernism."⁶⁵ Central among the features she analyzes is the tendency of such works to raise questions and contradictions about culture, experience, politics, and history that go unresolved in the treatments. Hutcheon posits that such works undermine the legitimacy of "totalizing master narratives," or discourses and systems of ordering that assert a unified, comprehensible reality. She states further:

This challenge foregrounds the process of meaning-making in the production and reception of art, but also in broader discursive terms: it foregrounds, for instance, how we make historical 'facts' out of brute 'events' of the past, or, more generally, how our various sign systems grant meaning to our experience.⁶⁶

According to Hutcheon, the "novel genre" of "historiographic metafiction" is characterized by a "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs," which "is made the grounds for...rethinking and reworking...the forms and

⁶⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York, London: Routledge, 1988, reprinted 1989), xi, xiii and Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, Vol 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 5.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, x.

contents of the past.”⁶⁷ She emphasizes that such a work does not reconsider the past as merely a nostalgic return, but rather intends to “open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive or teleological.”⁶⁸ Further, according to Hutcheon, this genre’s propensity to destabilize the truth claims and final conclusions of dominant narratives is not simply a destructive act. Rather, such works incorporate historical narratives and conventions in the light of a destabilizing critique that leaves open the possibility of apprehending subjects, identities and narratives typically excluded by them. What is more, this process, according to Hutcheon, models a significant ideological shift, a “move from the desire and expectation of sure and single meaning to a recognition of the value of difference and even contradictions.”⁶⁹ Djebbar follows precisely this type of process, mingling historical records with subversive female voices that destabilize the legitimacy of those master narratives’ purchase on the truth of the past. The usage of such “poetics” can also be seen in her embrace of polyphony and fictionalization to recuperate a view of the past and the women within it that is neither fixed nor final.

In exploring the nature of Djebbar’s project and poetic means by which she achieves it, I have also utilized the theoretical work of Trinh T. Minh-ha. Minh-ha calls on the storyteller to engage language with consciousness of the inherent structuring processes it entails and the ordering of knowledge and society that language and writing carry out. The manner in which language legitimates un-interrogated modes of “authenticity” and representations of the “real” must be disrupted. It is Minh-ha’s view

⁶⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 110.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 21.

that once the functioning of these processes is made transparent, it also becomes clear that no legitimate grounding for fixed identity exists. This radical perspective calls for the abandonment of a strict delineation between the author and her text and the embracing of the approach that sees the author and text as mutually constructed through the act of narration. Minh-ha exposes what is at stake for the writer in the “triple bind,” “woman, native, other.”⁷⁰ She must transcend these categorizations posited by dominant discourse, the limitations they place on her as well as the purely reactionary impulse to oppose them. Minh-ha instead posits that alterity or difference is the truthful mode of identity with which “feminist” writers must engage, if I may use the term provisionally here, in order to function as a “demystifying force.”⁷¹ From this perspective, negating the legitimacy of unified, singular identity does not “annul” any particular identity, but is rather a creative act that proliferates multiple identities and refuses claims to select any of them as final.⁷² The following study will consider how Djebbar’s project follows this model of engaged writing and fractured identity wherein the author is intermingled with her text. Ultimately, this study will attempt to show that in writing the novel, Djebbar not only strove to recuperate lost voices of early, empowered, Muslim women, but also attempted to write herself back into to the narrative of the Islamic past and to turn her alterity into a witnessing that foregrounds and affirms difference as the character of truthful Muslim identity.

⁷⁰ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 1989), 6.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 104.

Chapter I: Situating Djébar's turn to early Islamic history within the context of a contemporary critique

Assia Djébar's novel *Far from Madina* opens in the moments of the Prophet Muhammad's last illness, at the hour of his passing, as he lay in the arms of his young wife Aisha, in her bedchamber, where he would also be buried. "He is dead. He is not dead. He has inclined his head slightly to one side, to rest on Aisha's bosom."⁷³ In this intimate female space, the Prophet passes from the earth in the company of his wives. Versions of the same scene are narrated in reports preserved in classical Islamic history as well as in the Prophetic traditions. One can also find in the pages of these histories a prophetess, female warriors and rebels, runaways and many female narrators. Chronicles mention such women, but always in passing, only very rarely from a construction of their point of view. Overwhelmingly, these accounts tend to overlook the particularity of women, their names, their experiences, falling silent in recounting their significance. The process of creating memory that took place in Islamic narrative over the years, the selecting of ideals and making precedents out of the past, did not cull these fragments of history for the "truth" of women. Rather, this hermeneutics tended to cast new values upon symbolic women, deployed for specific purposes, first in medieval times, and again in modern eras of religious revival. Having been moved by the symphony of fragments, Assia Djébar returns in this novel to recuperate subversive traces of female voices left in the historical chronicles.

⁷³ Assia Djébar, *Far From Madina*, trans. Dorothy S. Blair (London: Quartet, 1991, 1994), 3.

In writing *Far from Madina*, Djébar sought to produce a work that would destabilize the ideal of gender identity embedded in the earliest Islamic historical narratives and posit alternative visions of female empowerment. Though crafted in relation to classical sources, Djébar's critique of gender identity is also addressed to the discourses and institutions of Islamic authority that evolved over the centuries and that continue to delineate narrow roles for women, up to and including contemporary regimes. In this chapter I will argue that by grounding her critique of circulating discourses on Muslim women within a project that appropriates canonical Sunni historiography, Djébar refuses the disjunction between feminism and Islam, critiquing normative Islamic discourse on women in contemporary Algeria without framing the conflict in terms of an East/West or a religious/secular binary. Djébar interrogates the historical sources she draws upon by questioning the assumptions of the chroniclers who painted women as passive. She considers what details historians might have missed or willfully omitted, and explores alternate vantage points and versions of events that suppose the active agency of women participants. Djébar accomplishes this by inserting her own questioning voice into the text. The project often requires Djébar to move beyond historical narration into the realm of improvisation and storytelling, practices that in her body of work are associated with a long history of female agency. These combined techniques foreground women's experiences in historical narrative and recover a version of history that affirms a wider set of roles and visible agency for women.

A BIOGRAPHY OF ASSIA DJEBAR

Assia Djebbar is an award-winning Francophone Algerian novelist, filmmaker and artist whose work has focused upon the experiences of women in Algerian society and since 1979 has also engaged the “historical dimension” of this exploration as a primary feature.⁷⁴ Her own experience on the borders of Algerian and French societies informs the liminal quality that characterizes the voicing of her narratives. She was born Fatma-Zohra Imalhayene in a small town on the Mediterranean coast of Algeria in 1936. Djebbar grew up in the milieu of colloquial Arabic and was also exposed to dialects of the Tamazight language.⁷⁵ Thanks to the influence of her mother who was trained in the art of improvised classical Arabic poetry, Djebbar attended a Qur’anic school as a young girl.⁷⁶ Djebbar’s father, who was of Amazigh⁷⁷ heritage, an indigenous, non-Arab, North African group, and himself a French language teacher, placed Djebbar in French language primary and secondary schools. European style education and the acquisition of the colonial language offered Djebbar liberties, freedom from the veil and the practice of seclusion, but also brought alienation from her mother tongue and her community. In the

⁷⁴ These are Djebbar’s own words translated by Hafid Gafaiti from an interview in French, “Entretien Avec Assia Djebbar, Ecrivain Algerien,” *Research in African Literatures* 19:2 (1988), 197-205. The translation appears in Gafaiti’s own work, Gafaiti, Hafid, “The Blood of Writing: Assia Djebbar’s Unveiling of Women and History,” *World Literature Today* 70:4 (Autumn 1996): 814.

⁷⁵ I am opting to use the term Tamazight as the language of the Amazigh people rather than the widely used term, Berber. See below in note 77 for further explanation.

⁷⁶ Clarisse Zimra, afterword to *Children of the New World*, 209.

⁷⁷ I have chosen to use the descriptor Amazigh rather than the more familiar term Berber to describe the indigenous people of Algeria (and other North African regions). The term Berber is associated with the meaning Barbarian and is term imposed by the West. For more information see T. Penchoen, “Tamazight (Berber).” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs, Brill Online, accessed March 26, 2012, http://www.brillonline.nl.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-7375.

1950's she moved to Paris to continue her education at the Lycee Fénelon where she studied history and was later accepted to the prestigious École Normale Supérieure. Not only the first Algerian woman, but also the first "Maghrebien" to ever be admitted, Djébar was later expelled because of her participation in student strikes in support of the Algerian independence movement. Further, she was "barred from ever taking the annual qualifying exams."⁷⁸

Djébar's career as a writer began with her expulsion at which point she assumed the pen name, Assia Djébar,⁷⁹ and published her first two novels *La Soif* and *Les Impatients* in 1957 and 1958, respectively. Djébar returned to North Africa to work for a Tunisian newspaper, *Mudjahid*, under the editorship of Frantz Fanon, the famed Martinican psychiatrist and revolutionary thinker, from 1958-62.⁸⁰ Through this period, Djébar also completed work on a master's thesis focusing on the medieval Tunisian thirteenth-century female saint Aisha al-Mannūbiyya⁸¹ under the direction of the

⁷⁸ Ursula Becker and Andrea Holstein, "Assia Djébar," *Voices from the Gaps*, The University of Wisconsin, <http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/djebbarAssia.php>; and Clarisse Zimra, afterword to *Children of the New World*, 205. The term "Maghrebien" typically refers to a person from the group of North African states which include Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and others.

⁷⁹ The choice of the first name Assia is an interesting one because it is associated with one of the exemplary women mentioned in the Qur'an, the wife of the Pharaoh who became the adoptive mother to Moses. Her name itself does not appear in the Qur'an, but rather in exegetical literature. She is treated there as a pious exemplar of the highest order and is in the company of Maryam, Khadija and Fatima in this regard. See Stowasser, 57-61.

⁸⁰ Moore, 55.

⁸¹ Faculty of Arts and Science at New York University, "Curriculum Vitae of Fatma-Zohra Imalhayene," The Silver Dialogues website, accessed January 12, 2002, http://silverdialogues.fas.nyu.edu/docs/CP/297/djebbar_cv.pdf; H.H. Abdul Wahab, "'Ā' Ishaal-Mannūbiyya." *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs, Brill Online, accessed January 05, 2012, http://www.brillonline.nl.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-0442.

influential, Orientalist scholar, Louis Massignon.⁸² Djebbar returned to Algeria to teach at the University of Algiers during the 1960's and 1970's and also embarked on work in theatre and film.⁸³ She again left Algeria in the 1980's because of the oppressive circumstances for women though she continued to visit regularly and maintained intimate family ties there.⁸⁴ In the late 1990's Djebbar assumed the directorship of the Center for French and Francophone Studies at Louisiana State University. Djebbar was the Silver Chair Professor of French and Francophone at New York University from 2002 until her retirement in 2011.⁸⁵

FAR FROM MADINA AND MODERN ALGERIA

Turning to her corpus of writing, Djebbar's treatment of history must be situated in the context of postmodern rupture where the truth claims of master narrative have been called into question and the colonizing force of such discourse has been acknowledged. Djebbar's work is informed by her personal experience of exile and the conditions of postcoloniality. This context brings with it an awareness of the societal fractures caused by and the cultural imperialism that came with the French occupation of Algeria. For Djebbar, there are always competing narratives, a sense of fragmentation is primary, and

⁸² Djebbar's study under this famed Orientalist is significant. Massignon was one of the foremost French Arabists and scholars of Islam of his age and is most often associated with his body of work on mystical Islam and his effort to construct a view of Islam for the Christian world from inside the faith, an effort to create mutual understanding. See Jacques Waardenburg, "Louis Massignon (1883-1962) as a Student of Islam," *Die Welt des Islams*, New Series 45:3 (2005): 312- 342.

⁸³ "Chronology (Assia Djebbar)," *World Literature Today* 70:4 (Autumn 1996).

⁸⁴ "LSU French professor takes highest honors at German book fair," *LSU News Service*, November 29, 2000 and Clarisse Zimra, "When the Past Answers Our Present," 123.

⁸⁵ The Silver Dialogues website, "Curriculum Vitae of Fatma-Zohra Imalhayene."

final authority elusive. In reworking narratives of the past, Djébar makes no claims to a version of history that is singular. Rather, she claims the right to decolonize the dominant narratives of French colonialism and to challenge Algerian nationalist discourse. Her body of work has centered on Algerian heritage and identity, first in light of the struggle for independence and later the civil war. Throughout, Djébar has engaged meaningfully in the project of recovering Algerian voices, and particularly female perspectives.

Though *Far from Madina* unfolds in the seventh century in the distinct milieu of the Arabian Peninsula, the narrative must be seen in communication with modern Algerian history and the conditions and conflicts of contemporary Algeria at the time of the author's writing. Published in French in 1991, Djébar has stated that she wrote *Far from Madina* in response to increasing violence and repression in Algeria after independence.⁸⁶ One event in particular in October 1988 affected Djébar, when the National Liberation Front (FLN), the secularist party in political control of the country since independence, put down popular demonstrations leaving more than 600 students, workers, women and activists dead. Public disapproval led to a victory for the oppositional Islamist party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), in the next elections. More crisis and upheaval followed when the FLN refused to validate election results, held onto the government, and their emergency presidential candidate was assassinated.⁸⁷ It is

⁸⁶ Zimra, "When the Past Answers Our Present," 122-123.

⁸⁷ Clarisse Zimra, "Introduction to The White of Algeria" *Yale French Studies* 87 (1995): 139-140; also see Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

against the backdrop of this cycle of violence and contest for power between secularist and Islamist regimes that Djebbar writes.

At the center of both factions' programs were repressive policies for women. This state of affairs must be considered in light of the legacy of the colonial encounter wherein the French occupiers asserted that the position of women was illustrative of the backwardness of Algerian Muslim society generally and attempted to force a secularist revision of social values.⁸⁸ Algerian resistance movements, though varied and nuanced in their responses, on the whole invested in women as symbols of cultural authenticity. This focus on women as a locus of the negotiation of cultural identity persists and was at a pitch in the 1980's and 1990's. At the time, the FLN promoted roles for women in the work force and supported women's education, but their policies were predicated on sexually segregated working environments and the subordination of women to patriarchal control, most clearly illustrated by the passage of the Algerian Family Code in 1984 which diminished women's legal rights.⁸⁹ Utilizing tactics of violent intimidation, the FIS pursued a policy to ban women from the public arena completely, aside from mosques and other gender-segregated, regulated spaces. Likewise they demanded a mandatory regime of veiling.⁹⁰ At the height of conflict between the FLN and FIS, women became targets for assassination between both factions. Radical members of the FLN murdered veiled women in opposition to Islamist threats to secular society while the

⁸⁸ See Lazreg, 36-41, 51-54 and 80-88.

⁸⁹ Susan Slyomovics, "'Hassiba Ben Bouali, If you Could See our Algeria': Women and Public Space in Algeria," *Middle East Report* 192 (Jan-Feb 1995): 10-11.

⁹⁰ The traditional form of veiling in Algerian has been the haik. The Islamist mandate typically referred to the hijab, or a headscarf and modest gown. *Ibid.*, 10.

FIS/GIA “threatened death to the 7 million primary and high school students and their 320,000 teachers unless the norms of Islamic education were followed,” namely segregation and veiling.⁹¹

In *Far from Madina*, Djebbar offers a rebuttal to the increasingly repressive and violent regimes’ policies towards women as well as their programs that made women the battleground of their ideological warfare. According to Djebbar:

This is a book that is meant to respond/answer back...it is a piece written to indict the ‘official’ version of history, according to which Woman must be all covered up...and kept housebound [relegated inside].⁹²

The book responds to the Islamist demands for the subordination of women, gender segregation and a return to veiling. Djebbar recounts that she was compelled to conjure this collective of female voices as fragmentary evidence of “pre-veiled, freely-circulating” women of the first community of Islam in historical chronicles suggested to her an alternate paradigm of Islamic female identity.⁹³ The work also sets itself up against the FLN’s position of violence and absolute secularism. By positing the notion that the definition of Islamic society is a matter open for debate and reinterpretation and presenting alternative representations, *Far from Madina* eschews the notion that secularism should be fought for and protected at any cost. Djebbar strives to claim ground between these extreme views in order to articulate a vision of Islamic female identity that resonates with her experience as a Muslim woman and accomodates her radical critique of fixed identity and interpretation.

⁹¹ Ibid., 11-12.

⁹² Zimra, “Not so Far from Medina,” 823.

⁹³ Ibid., 824.

POSITIONALITY AND MULTIPLE CRITIQUE

Djebar's work critiques contemporary Algerian policies and violence towards women from a risky borderline position. Living in the West and writing in French, Djebar's engagement with Islamic authority is in jeopardy of being associated with the very strands of Western secularism and the phenomenon of cultural contamination that Islamist ideology sets itself in binary opposition to. From the beginning of her career as a writer, Djebar's work was subject to multiple critical discourses. In France, Djebar's early novels, which addressed identity conflicts that Algerian women of those times faced, were lauded by many. The press hailed Djebar as the "the new Algerian woman" whose westernized appearance and critical perspective on the position of Algerian women fit the French agenda for transforming Algerian society. It has been speculated that General De Gaulle ordered her reinstatement to the École Normale de Sèvres not because of her great talent, as he stated, but in an attempt to appropriate her voice and claim her as an ally in the effort to put down the Algerian insurgency.⁹⁴ Simultaneously, Djebar's early work was critiqued because of a perceived lack of engagement with the political situation by sections of the French audience and nationalists in Algeria. A Moroccan writer, Abdelkebir Khatibi, stands out in having appreciated in this early chapter of Djebar's work a different type of engagement and having asked, "Has anyone truly understood that the discovery of her own body, for the central character of *La Soif* is

⁹⁴ Zimra, afterword to *Children of the New World*, 204, 207.

just as important as revolution?”⁹⁵ Khatibi’s insight points to the impossible choice of trajectories that the majority of critical voices expected Djébar’s work to align with, either her commitment lay with Algerian nationalists, or with the feminist cause.

Even as Djébar began to take up war and Algerian history as central motifs in her work, she continued to face criticism at the hands of Algerian nationalist intellectuals who called for the Arabicization of art after independence.⁹⁶ In a speech she delivered at a symposium at the University of Strasbourg in France in 1993, Djébar addressed this regime of Arabicization, saying it was in effect a “cutting off the living space of other languages.”⁹⁷ Not only was French language programming banned from television and radio, but offerings in Tamazight, an indigenous language, as well.⁹⁸ What is more, the register of Arabic that was promoted was unfriendly to the local dialect and the absorption of regionalisms was not encouraged. While the pressure placed upon Djébar to embrace Arabic in her work did not cause her to give up the enterprise of writing all together, it did lead to a ten-year hiatus. Beginning in the late 1960’s, Djébar dedicated herself to the effort of studying Arabic in the hopes of becoming an Arabic writer. In 1979 she produced her first film in spoken Arabic, *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*.⁹⁹ However, writing in Arabic continued to elude Djébar who points to the

⁹⁵ Ibid., 211.

⁹⁶ Pushpa Naidu Parekh and Siga Fatima Jagne, eds., “Assia Djébar,” in *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 139.

⁹⁷ Assia Djébar and Andrew Benson. “The White of Algeria.” *Yale French Studies* 87 (1985): 144-145.

⁹⁸ Again, I am opting to use the term Tamazight as the language of the Amazigh people rather than the widely used term, Berber.

⁹⁹ Nada Elia, “The Fourth Language” in *Intersections: Gender, Nation and Community in Arab Women’s Novels*, eds. Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman, and Therese Saliba (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 186-187.

diglossic nature of Arabic language usage as a major obstruction thwarting her efforts. The oral vernacular she grew up with and with which she conversed with her friends in Algeria was significantly distant and sufficiently distinct from the classical Arabic she had studied and with which she read historical tracts and archival material. She would have to forge a literary voice in a register of Arabic that bridged the two worlds in order to become an Arabic writer.¹⁰⁰ When Djébar resumed publishing in 1980, she would continue to do so in French.¹⁰¹

The next phase of Djébar's work was explicitly engaged with Algerian history and *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (1985) was the first of a four-volume project that Djébar called the "Algerian Quartet" in which she set out to explore and reconnect to Algerian history and her own roots.¹⁰² *Far from Madina* (1991) also partakes in the historical dimension that characterizes the Quartet and comes out of that period of writing. It is largely in light of the work in this period that Djébar is today considered among the most accomplished Francophone North African writers. Her work has been subject to sophisticated and sensitive treatments in European language based literary criticism circles and she has garnered highly-regarded awards including the prestigious Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1996. Nonetheless, her work continues to

¹⁰⁰ Assia Djébar, "Albert Russo talks with Assia Djébar," Le Blog d'Assia Djébar, posted July 30, 2008, accessed January 13, 2012, <http://assiadjebar.canalblog.com/archives/interview/index.html>.

¹⁰¹ The significance of writing in "the enemy's language" is a central conflict and theme that Djébar explores throughout *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, Djébar, *Fantasia*, 215. However, in an interview Djébar speaks to the fact that writing *Far from Madina* in French gave her a welcomed freedom from conventions of Arabic language for speaking about the sacred past. Zimra, "When the Past Answers Our Present," 129.

¹⁰² In addition to *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (1985) the other three works that make up the "Algerian Quartet" are: *A Sister to Scheherazade* (1987), *So Vast the Prison* (1995) and *Algerian White* (2002).

reside on the borders of both Western and Algerian discourse and continues to be subject to misapprehension in both realms. In Algeria, her work has been subject to the criticism of being “too feminist.”¹⁰³ In France, her critique of the persistence of patriarchal structures in Algerian society is sometimes appropriated into Orientalizing discourse. *Far from Madina* proves to be a particularly challenging and rewarding text for Western critics. In order to truly appreciate Djébar’s effort in the work, a reader must possess an awareness of Islamic tradition as well as the openness to reinterpret it.¹⁰⁴ This background is missing for many Western and secularist audiences. And yet, some of the highest accolades that Djébar has received from Western circles have come with an appreciation for precisely this text. The juror who nominated Djébar for the Neustadt prize, Barbara Frischmuth, called *Far from Madina* Djébar’s “most important work.”¹⁰⁵

So far, none of Djébar’s novels have been translated into the Arabic language. On the one hand this must be understood in light of the fact that the work of many Algerian Francophone writers has remained out of reach in Algeria. Again referencing her 1993 speech in Strasbourg, Djébar decries the fact that:

the outstanding works of the most important ‘national’ writers (Kateb, Dib, Ferraoun, Mammeri) translated almost throughout the world, were left untranslated into the ‘national language’ for thirty years! All they were reluctantly allowed was the academic readership at university, but confined to the ‘foreign languages’ department!¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Parekh and Jagne, 139.

¹⁰⁴ Again, I point to George Lang on this simple insight. Lang, 1.

¹⁰⁵ William Riggan, “The 1996 Neustadt International Prize for Literature: Jurors and Candidates,” *World Literature Today* 70:2 (Spring 1996): 338.

¹⁰⁶ Djébar and Benson, “The White of Algeria,” 147.

In the case of Djébar's work, the lack of availability in Arabic continues. A play she wrote in French in the late sixties, *Red is the Dawn* (1969), is now available in Arabic. Also, her two films, *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua* (1979) and *The Zerda and Songs of Forgetting* (1982) are both Arabic language features.¹⁰⁷ In an interview with Clarisse Zimra, Djébar discussed the status of *Far from Madina* in particular and further explained the situation saying, "I refused permission to translate in Arabic. I was leery of how meticulous and how accurate the language could be. I will only allow it if I can work right along with the translators." While the book had been positively received in French circles and in the French media, she was keenly aware of it being a potentially provocative work for Arabic-speaking audiences in Algeria. The novel was released in Algeria in French, and indeed, when portions of it were excerpted in the French language Algerian newspaper *Algérie-Actualité*, it did bring about a strong negative response from some Islamist circles.¹⁰⁸

"Bearded young men" protested the work and argued that "a woman has no right to talk about the Prophet if she is not 'mastoura' – which is to say, a pious believer who wears a chador."¹⁰⁹

While Djébar stood her ground in seizing the right to reinterpret the traditional writings of Islamic history, and while she was eager to enter into dialogue with Algerian women about the role of women in Islamic history and women's proper place in Muslim society,

¹⁰⁷ Parekh and Jagne, 136.

¹⁰⁸ Djébar and Benson, "The White of Algeria," 146 n4.

¹⁰⁹ Zimra, "When the Past Answers the Present," 127-128. Also note that the use of the word chador is not culturally appropriate here. It is likely Zimra's translation of Djébar's word choice (from the French). The chador is typically associated specifically with an outer garment worn as part of Iranian hijab practices, not Algerian ones. The closest thing to an equivalent in the Magrebian context would be the haik. It is possible that the term chador was used because of its currency due to the fact that the Iranian context was an important reference point at the time.

she was skeptical that her work could be legibly rendered in Arabic at that time. The interview referenced here was conducted in 1993, and as of today the work remains unavailable in Arabic. So too, Djebbar's status in terms of her cultural authenticity and religious belonging remains a matter of debate.¹¹⁰

Even if Djebbar's work meets the burden of proof to be considered culturally authentic, she continues to speak from the outside, from the contested, marginal social role of Algerian woman. It has been argued that it is precisely because of Muslim women's experiences as Other in their own societies, and for Muslim women in the diaspora, their sense of multiple identity, that they are inclined toward non-binary, multiple critique.¹¹¹ Seen in this light, Djebbar's positionality also affords her a "transcultural perspective," a point of view that situates her at a critical distance from the natural order of both traditional and colonial values.¹¹² This vantage point allows Djebbar to observe both confrontation and difference in this cultural encounter and affords her the opportunity to "realize new possibilities for dealing with tradition."¹¹³ According to Miriam Cooke, this type of critique results from the introduction of gender as a third term that fractures binary oppositions such as East and West and religious and secular. Its aim is not simply to undermine one discourse in order to replace it with another. Rather, it functions to problematize discourse, to stimulate the reevaluation of dialectical positions, and above all, to assert the possibility of multiple points of view and to create

¹¹⁰ Zimra, "When the Past Answers our Present," 127-128.

¹¹¹ Miriam Cooke, "Women, Religion and the Postcolonial Arab World," 160.

¹¹² Fadia Suyoufie, "The Appropriation of Tradition in Selected Works of Contemporary Arab Women Writers," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 39 (2008): 224-226.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 226.

an opening for new formulations of tradition.¹¹⁴ Leveraging multiple positionality as a “critical rhetorical strategy” enables Middle Eastern women to simultaneously critique gender hierarchies they confront in their own societies whilst affirming their belonging to that society and expressing solidarity with their fellow citizens against external forms of post/colonial repression. Djebbar employs “multiple critique” by challenging an internal, contemporary Algerian social problem and its roots in formative Islamic discourse while at the same time consciously avoiding proposing remedies from foreign conceptions of modernity or in terms of Western social values.¹¹⁵ Djebbar gives voice to a revisionary paradigm from the indigenous ground of Islamic history. Rather than setting an argument against Islam, Djebbar claims the right to revisit the sources and reinterpret the past which may be considered modern acts of *ijtihad*.

ORALITY, THE STORYTELLER, MEMORY

Examining another of Djebbar’s works from the period in which she wrote *Far From Madina* helps to elucidate her approach to the reinterpretation of the past. A technique central to Djebbar’s work is placing voices of authority in communication with those subjects they have repressed. This practice often involves bringing fragments and traces of female voices embedded in text to bear on a reconsideration of a narrative’s overall meaning. This method can be clearly observed in her novel *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, which addresses the historical period of the French occupation of

¹¹⁴ Cooke, “Women, Religion and the Postcolonial Arab World,” 160-163.

¹¹⁵ Zimra, “Not so Far from Medina,” 826.

Algeria beginning in 1830 through the Algerian war for independence culminating in 1962. In this work, Djébar engages chronicles and correspondence written by French soldiers as a site for excavating Algerian women's voices. In one section Djébar pours over the letters of two French captains who describe a particular raid in the region of Makendra that took place in October of 1840.¹¹⁶ She gleans the details of the event itself. The raiding party surprised a camp deserted by its warriors, inhabited only by women, children and animals. Djébar reflects on these colonial officers' accounts and how their mannered-letters home had the effect of concealing the violence and horror of the raid, recasting loathsome acts as solemn duty. She compares these chroniclers to Caesar, "whose style anaesthetized one *a posteriori* to his brutality as a general [italics original]."¹¹⁷ Considering more broadly the "veritable scribblomania" that "infected" French officers and the manner in which French accounts of the occupation of Algeria far outweighed Algerian ones, she concludes:

words themselves become a decoration, flaunted by officers like the carnations they wear on their buttonholes; words will become their most effective weapons...The supererogatory protuberances of their publications will form a pyramid to hide the initial violence from view.¹¹⁸

The constructed nature of the colonial narrative is not Djébar's only discovery. Inside the two officer's writings are signs that the women and youth of the camp at Makendra were not simply passive victims but rather agents. It is reported that the women sometimes refuse tears, or "refuse even to look," or "smear their faces with mud and excrement" in

¹¹⁶ Assia Djébar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, trans. Dorothy S. Blair (Portsmouth, NM: Heinemann; 1993), 50-57.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

order reject the enemy's gaze.¹¹⁹ These women rebelled, utilizing everything at their disposal to defy the French soldiers' assumptions of mastery over them. Djébar goes further, probing beyond the words of the text of these colonial letters to find evidence that even as they were besieged by the French company that the women exerted influence upon their aggressors. Djébar states:

Some passages stand out, a blot on the rest: for example the description of a woman's foot that has been hacked off to appropriate the anklet of gold or silver...Another example: the description of the corpses of the seven women who become, in spite of the author, scrofulous excrescences on his elegant prose style.¹²⁰

For Djébar, these mentions belie the idea that French soldiers were numb to the violence they carried out. "He inserts these words, they prevent the ink of the whole letter from drying: because of the obscenity of the torn flesh that he could not suppress in his description."¹²¹ These writings betray the officers' own horror and disquiet. Placing herself through imaginative leap at the scene of these events, Djébar focuses her attention on her physical senses, attunes to the environment and catches the tune of a missed note, the "women's shrill ululation," permeating the camp, sounds she imagines "haunted" the soldiers ever after.

Djébar's reworking of the intratextual elements of the officers' letters not only challenges the authority of those particular texts, but opens the door to a wider set of practices of revision and re-appropriation. Another tactic that Djébar employs widely throughout her work is to treat both the oral testimony of women and literary

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 56.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 55.

¹²¹ Ibid., 56.

reconstructions of the past as though they possess the same degree of authority as the narrations of colonial officers, hallowed classical Islamic texts and official accounts. In so doing, Djebbar undermines hierarchical relations in discourse and the indexing of knowledge. Whether this process involves invention or departure from an authentic historical record is not the critical factor for Djebbar because she is not invested in any final, particular formulation of events. Her chief concerns revolve around destabilizing fixed versions of history in order to open up space to inscribe memories that have been silenced or obscured, which can only be authentically restored through creativity and variation.

Djebbar emphasizes the significance of these forgotten voices, of women's oral culture, as the repositories of communal memory. One of the ways that she accomplishes this is by inscribing oral accounts of living women into the written word. It is clear that Djebbar's vision of women's oral culture in seventh-century Madina is inspired by her personal encounter with Amazigh women's oral culture. Djebbar's works, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, her 1979 film, *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*, and her short stories all include narrative components that derive from oral interviews that she conducted with Amazigh women who were witness to and participants in the Algerian Revolution. By transcribing these accounts into her work, Djebbar strives to insert Amazigh women's voices into the historical record of the revolution. However, for Djebbar, this is not a straightforward task. In *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*, a meditative, image-driven film that features many scenes without dialogue or voice over, simply images and music or ambient sound, the narrator and central character

attempts to come to terms with her own memory of the Algerian war of independence in part by listening to the stories of the women of her tribe. Coming and going from these meetings, the narrator repeats, “I am looking...but not for anything in particular...I am listening...to broken memories”¹²² Memory is not an objective phenomenon that is strictly recounted and recorded, nor is it characterized by a neat teleology that guides reports to a logical conclusion.

In collecting oral testimony, Djébar is witness to Amazigh women revisiting the traumas of war, their reminiscences full of the loss, struggle and defiance of those times. The burden of these memories exceeds logic and signification. Passing on such memories requires an opening of oneself to the past, authenticity, vulnerability, courage. Embarking on her own retelling of one of the oral testimonies, Djébar says, “The voice recounts? Scarcely that. It digs out the old revolt.”¹²³ Characterizing her informant, Cherifa, Djébar says:

Her voice lifts the burden of memory; it now wings its way toward the summer of 1956, when she was just a girl, the summer of devastation...Do her words bring it to light?¹²⁴

It is not certain that Cherifa can render the particularities of that summer, but her words, faithfully birthed and passed on, will connect listeners to a collective memory, to “the old revolt.” And so, Djébar calls these testimonies “torch words.”¹²⁵ She is entrusted with them, burdened with them. They are incendiary, volatile, and capable of disrupting the

¹²² *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*, directed by Assia Djébar (New York, NY: Women Make Movies, 1990). DVD.

¹²³ Djébar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, 141.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

orderly discourse of history. They also have the power to transport those whom they reach to their own reservoirs of memory.

In Djébar's work, this conception of memory is intimately linked to the role of the storyteller, which often is situated at a particular disjuncture from the scribe. For Djébar, the oral work of the storyteller is ritualistic, flexible and improvisational. In *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*, the narrator conjures "old women whispering at night, their stories become wonders for dreaming children, history revisited every night in broken words, voices searching for each other."¹²⁶ The narrator also recounts that her own grandmother "told me the story of her tribe every night." These storytellers possess the memories that they retell deep in their beings. To pass them on, they must be woven, repeated, until they make a connection with the listener. In contrast, scribes tend to set down memory as a singular, exclusionary truth that, if it becomes rigid, is often used to serve the construction of authority.

Though she is a writer, Djébar's narratives seek affinity with the art of her storytelling-foremothers. She too must call upon her creative vision in order to explore history and memory under the conditions of alterity and silence, modalities that often resist representation in language let alone inclusion in official narrative. In *Fantasia*, Djébar revisits the French colonial record of two separate incidents during the summer of 1845 wherein entire tribes were wiped out when the French military blockaded them in caves and set fires at all the entrances, turning the subaltern spaces into "furnaces."¹²⁷

¹²⁶ *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*, directed by Assia Djébar.

¹²⁷ Djébar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, 70-71.

On the first occasion, a French lieutenant-colonel ordered a complete tally and detailed account of the horrifying devastation. Official reports of the operation caused uproar in the French Parliament. Thus, on the next occasion that the same tactics were used, the incident was omitted from the French public record, made known only by way of the accounts of relatives of the tribe that was lost, and clues left in the commander's letters home.¹²⁸ Djébar weaves together what is known of these incidents, the numbers killed, descriptions of corpses, conjecture about what their positions in the caves suggested about their last moments, the horror of the French officers, into a narrative that "illuminates the[se] martyrs" and the brutality of their massacre. These fragmented details are gathered together in Djébar's text so that the memory of these lost souls might go on, so that their story might be born out of the act of retelling itself.

Djébar's approach is in stark contrast with another French researcher she finds in the archives, Gauthier, "a respectable academic," who also revisited these caves. His methodical study was carried out at a comfortable distance from the abhorrent events. Djébar borrows from him the title of speleologist and applies it to her own work to carry a double meaning. Not only is she, like him, interested in the historic caves where the fumigations occurred but she is also called to search the hidden recesses of histories written in French in order to recover the silenced stories of her people. She states:

Nearly one and a half centuries after Pélissier and Saint Arnaud,¹²⁹ I am practising a very special kind of spelaeology, since in my descent into those dark caverns

¹²⁸ Ibid., 73-76.

¹²⁹ Pélissier and Saint-Arnaud are the two French generals that led the military operations that resulted in the cave fumigations about which Djébar writes.

my only hand-holds are words in the French language – reports, accounts, evidence from the past.¹³⁰

In contrast to the academic who believes himself an impartial interlocutor on the events of the caves, Djébar admits that she is rather, “obsessed.” Given this vast distance between the point of view of the chroniclers and that of the martyred, and her own investment in bridging that gap, Djébar admits that her work proceeds with a “belated ‘partiality.’” She writes not to arrive at some empirical truth, but rather to “inscribe the charred passion of my ancestors.”¹³¹ To accomplish this task, Djébar use all her senses, her creativity and every narrative tool.

RETURNING TO THE ISLAMIC PAST

In *Far From Madina*, Djébar must similarly find a way to speak for her ancestors, in this case for those from whom she is separated by many centuries. She sets out to revive the memory of the first Muslim women from the fragments of historiography, weaving their voices together anew so that they might speak back to the authorized version of collective memory that has pushed them to the margins of the narrative. Djébar is drawn to the particular period of early Islamic history in which *Far from Madina* is set because she sees the Prophet’s death, the passing away of the living stream of communal guidance, as devastating for women. The Qur’an, the holy book that provided Muhammad a continuously flowing source of guidance for leading a changing community would cease arriving. Women would increasingly be subject to narrow, rigid

¹³⁰ Djébar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, 76-78.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 77-79.

interpretations of Qur'an and a web of newly articulated Islamic values. *Far from Madina* contains a foreboding sense of the future, but finds women before they have been segregated and subjected to strict controls. These themes echo Djebbar's interest in the contemporary situation and status of Algerian women who, at the time in which she was writing the novel, were facing stricter and stricter controls on their behavior. *Far From Madina* focuses upon both typical and exemplary Muslim women participating in public life at a time when "the verses about Veiling ...concern[ed] only the Mothers of the Believers and not ordinary women."¹³²

Djebbar is also drawn to this historical moment because it predates the era of dominant, written literary culture and the normative social functions and marginalization of women that came with it. The recuperative project of *Far from Madina* is called for, in Djebbar's view, because as history was written down, women's voices were lost and their place in society newly defined. In contrast, during the time frame of the novel, oral literary culture was the primary form in which the Qur'an, teachings and Prophetic traditions were circulating. The women of the historical Madina played a vital role in the transmission of hadith, the collected sayings and deeds of the Prophet, but these traditions would be set down in writing by an exclusively male scholarly class.¹³³ Aisha, one of the Prophet's wives, was among the most prolific hadith transmitters, passing on some 1,200

¹³²Djebbar, *Far from Madina*, 182. "Mothers of the Believers" refers to the Prophet's wives who were singled out and ordered by the Qur'an to observe rules of segregation and covering.

¹³³ Denise A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of 'Aisha Bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 6.

traditions.¹³⁴ But in the period that followed, women were not only excluded from this phase of representing and constructing history, but also from the process of interpreting it. There are no known “female Muslim scriptors” who were involved in the process of compiling hadith.¹³⁵ Likewise, Islamic scholars throughout the medieval period were successful in excluding women from participating in the domains of theology and law, where the hadith and the Qur’an were interpreted and the resulting discourse formed the basis of religious and legal orthodoxy for Islamic society.¹³⁶

The representation of women in Islamic history is bound up with the normative discourse that evolved in legal, exegetical and historical writings produced in the context of an expanding empire whose political and religious elite sought to firm up an authoritative understanding of the religion and clearly articulate communal identity.¹³⁷ One of the widely held views on this history is that after the death of the Prophet and then the Companions and Successors, there was an urge to solidify Islamic authority and that the hadith traditions were written down and proliferated in the eighth century to serve this purpose.¹³⁸ Just as the Prophet’s life came to serve as precedent for the Muslim faithful, so did the lives of his companions including women such as his wives, and in a different light, his daughter Fatima. Women’s lives were deliberated over by scholars because they were sometimes relevant to understanding the historical circumstances in which

¹³⁴ Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: from Ibn Sa‘d to Who’s Who*. (Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 1994), 28.

¹³⁵ Spellberg, 11.

¹³⁶ For a discussion of the canonization of Sunni hadith see, Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 38-40.

¹³⁷ Chase Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 85-92.

¹³⁸ Brown, 23.

Qur'anic verses were revealed and because they transmitted and were mentioned in hadith. At the same time, these scholars and jurists focused on women because maintaining a particular "gendered social hierarchy" was part of their discursive project.¹³⁹ These exegetical and hermeneutical processes recast and reconstructed women's stories in the light of the dogmatic valuations of the day, whether they gave expression to misogynist assumptions about the female sex or projected idealizations onto symbolic women from sacred history.¹⁴⁰

Barbara Stowasser's work traces how this interpretive process also changed the way the Qur'an and its injunctions were understood. She states:

[M]any of the Qur'an's women's stories bear the lesson that a woman's faith and righteousness depend on her own will and decision and that neither association with a godly man or a sinner decides a woman's commitment to God. Medieval Islamic exegesis, however, viewing women's innate nature as weak but also dangerous to the established moral order, largely excluded the Qur'anic theme of female spiritual freedom and moral responsibility in favor of the exegetic maxim that 'woman is (i.e., should be) man's follower in all things.'¹⁴¹

In a similar manner, Stowasser argues that strict obligations related to dress, behavior and worship enumerated in the Qur'an for the Prophet's wives in order to safeguard their virtue were "extended" by the same interpreters to apply to all Muslim women.¹⁴² The revised interpretations shaped theological guidelines related to women and were central to the production of legal structures of society from the era in which the canon of Islamic jurisprudence took shape until modern times.

¹³⁹ A. Geissinger, "Gendering the Classical Tradition of Quran Exegesis: Literary Representations and Textual Authority in Medieval Islam" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2008), 3-4.

¹⁴⁰ Stowasser, 20.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁴² Ibid., 92.

Far from Madina intervenes on Islamic narrative before these interpretive processes have played out. By revisiting this early period, Djébar brings to light a view of the first Muslim women that contradicts discourses that contend that authentic Islam requires that women be subject to strict codes of behavioral control, like those articulated by medieval Islamic jurists and by the Islamists of her day. Djébar uses the trace mentions of these women in Islamic historiography to bring attention to female agency and mobility, to show that women of this era had voices and that they used them, and to highlight the fact that women's actions were socially significant. Through the narrative act of bringing these female voices to the fore, *Far from Madina* suggests that these characteristics were at least tolerated features of female Muslim identity in the community's earliest and most hallowed days. Simultaneously the work thus exposes the constructed nature of official discourses that place strict controls on Muslim women. In so doing, the novel attains its author's central goal, to open alternate trajectories for female Muslim identity from the native ground of its own past.

Chapter II: Re-imagining ideal Muslim women: the case of Fatima bint Muhammad

The story of the life of Fatima bint Muhammad has been shaped and reshaped by generations of Muslims. Though only a few specifics of her biography are reported in the earliest historical sources and prophetic traditions, a robust narrative has developed over the centuries. These depictions of Fatima reflect the perspectives and values of the Muslims that have engaged her persona to construct communal history and establish norms. Muslims have idealized Fatima because of her close relationship to the Prophet and because of her example of piety and forbearance. Shi'i Muslims have placed special emphasis on Fatima also because of her role as genealogical link between the Prophet and the Imamate. Literary traditions of the sect have elaborated the story of her life with miraculous and legendary events, and employed her persona to legitimate the political and religious authority of the sect.¹⁴³ Both Shi'i and Sunni discourses have presented Fatima as the highest ideal of female Muslim identity. For Sunnis, this characterization typically emphasizes her familial roles, virtuosity, life of poverty and spirituality.¹⁴⁴ In Shi'i tradition Fatima is also venerated as a martyr for the cause of her family's right to

¹⁴³ For a detailed discussion of the evolution the Fatima legend see, Verena Klemm, "Image Formation of an Islamic Legend: Fatima, the Daughter of the Prophet Muhammad," in *Ideas, Images, and Methods of Portrayal: Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam*, ed. Sebastian Gunther (Boston; Leiden: Brill, c2005); Veccia Vaglieri, "Fāṭima." *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2011. Brill Online.

¹⁴⁴ Barbara Stowasser's research points to this development in tafsir and qisas al-anbiya literature and says that according to these sources Fatima ranked among the four holiest women of Islam along with Mary, Khadija and Asya. Stowasser, 79-80. Denise Spellberg traces the idealization of Fatima in Sunni and Shi'i sources. Spellberg, 156-161. Denise Soufie analyzes the medieval constructions of Fatima's saintliness in Sunni and Shi'i writings and likewise examines how these groups compared Fatima and Maryam in Denise L. Soufie, "The Image of Fatima in Classical Muslim Thought" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1997), 75-80 and 167-180. For a discussion of how the selection of Fatima (and Khadija) over Aisha as the most ideal Muslim women may be viewed as a constructive idealization, see Spellberg, 178.

succession. In part because of the paucity of mentions of her, the earliest Sunni tradition has portrayed Fatima as a woman who played only a marginal role in public life.¹⁴⁵ Representations of Fatima remain important in the construction of Islamic identity through present times and as such, contemporary Muslim authorities and writers continue to engage her persona as a figure of devotion, as a legitimizing force, and as an exemplar for female behavior.

While depictions and legends of Fatima have held great significance for Muslim women, there are few examples of female Muslim authors treating her story. Assia Djebar's novel *Far from Madina* is a rare example that features a retelling of Fatima's life from a contemporary Muslim feminist's perspective. In the work, Djebar uses formal elements of early Islamic historiography and relies upon classical Sunni sources. These techniques place her novel in conversation with classical Islamic traditions and bring legitimacy to her subversive project which aims to shift the boundaries of that canon. Djebar improvises female voices in an effort to restore female agency and subjectivity to the historical narrative and draws a portrait of Fatima as a rebellious figure that poses vocal and direct challenges to authority. This essay examines Djebar's overall project in *Far from Madina* and treatment of Fatima in particular. In what follows, I consider Djebar's selection of classical sources and explore connections and contrasts between the earliest canonical Sunni renderings of Fatima and those literary elaborations found in the novel. I argue that the vision of empowered women in the first Muslim community

¹⁴⁵ This summarization is based on an examination of reports mentioning Fatima in *Sahih al-Bukhari* as well as mentions found in Ibn Sa'd, Ibn Ishaq/Ibn Hisham and al-Tabari. These sources will be treated in greater length below. I have also relied on Vaglieri and Klemm's summary articles and Denise Soufie's work on Fatima, all three referenced in notes 143 and 144 above.

posited in *Far from Madina* destabilizes the ideal of gender identity constructed in early Islamic historiography and contend that its subversive message continues to reverberate throughout subsequent normative discourse. Further, this chapter considers how Djebbar's treatment of complex female relationships recasts communal conflicts and resists inscribing oppositional and sectarian formulations of Islamic identity.

FRAMING THE NOVEL *FAR FROM MADINA*

Djebbar's treatment of Fatima is part of a larger recuperative project that retells the stories of the community of women who appear on the margins of the earliest Sunni sources of Islamic history. In taking up her story, Djebbar's purpose is not to uncover the true origins of the historical Fatima, nor is it to clearly ascertain what significance the Prophet's only surviving progeny held for early Sunni scholars. Djebbar is responding to the silences in these classical accounts, the lack of details around the women of the first community of Islam. In applying her creativity to the blind spots of early chroniclers, Djebbar's endeavor is to revitalize communal memory of Islam's early women and to explore what meaning they can hold for contemporary Muslims and especially Muslim women. That so important a figure as Fatima received only marginal attention from the earliest Sunni chroniclers underscores the extent to which women were under-represented in this area of Islamic history.¹⁴⁶ *Far from Madina* follows characters from the last days

¹⁴⁶ To be clear, the Shi'i tradition presents a much more vivid picture of Fatima, in large part due to the fact that Fatima's family is seen as the sole rightful inheritor of leadership of the community and also because of the role she plays in the tradition's literature as a mouthpiece of Shi'i polemics. Soufie suggests that the fact that Fatima tends not to receive mention around controversial topics such as the

of the Prophet's illness until the death of Abu Bakr and Umar's assumption of the caliphate, supplemented by recollections of earlier days and flashes of the future. Djebbar returns to the past in an intervention and conjures female voices that were silenced when those days were recorded. Among them is a Fatima who is transformed from a silent spectator of events, to a woman who was "rebellious fiercely against power, all forms of power."¹⁴⁷

Acknowledging that she does not have access to the truth of these events or the voices and thoughts of the women whose experiences she sets out to narrate, Djebbar calls her project a novel. She sketches the characters of less emphasized women based only on glimpses of information. And in the case of Fatima, Djebbar creatively engages the basic biography transmitted by classical sources. Importantly, she does so with a bent towards envisioning Fatima as a multi-dimensional woman whose experience is relevant to a reconsideration of the position of contemporary Muslim. Djebbar imagines interiority and conversations, reverses the vantage point of events and even improvises new scenes. Despite all this, Djebbar remains committed to the frame of the story set down by the Sunni historians. She does not undertake a simple fictionalization but rather fills in the open spaces she finds in classical accounts. Djebbar's resulting reinterpretation of the sources blurs the line between history and fiction. Djebbar calls her work in *Far From Madina* an instance of *ijtihad*, a term related to the use of reason in Islamic jurisprudence and that connoted among Islamic Modernists the idea that it is permissible to utilize

succession crisis is linked to Sunni chroniclers' attempts to downplay those events all together, see Soufie, 84. To be clear, this chapter is focused on early Sunni renderings of Fatima.

¹⁴⁷ Djebbar, *Far from Madina*, 274.

reason to reinterpret sources, usually the Qur'an and hadith, when those sources do not directly answer a question or if their surface meanings contradict enlightened understanding.¹⁴⁸ Ijtihad also has the simple meaning of striving, often in the act of reasoning. Through her reconsideration of the sources, Djébar hopes to open up the stories of the earliest Muslim women to new considerations and interpretations. In her attempts to recover their vantage points and agency, Djébar maintains the basic historical kernels set down by her canonical Sunni sources. While attentive to these historical points, Djébar is also aware of the literary and editorial work those writers engaged in. Her project thus represents a new chapter in a long tradition of constructing the story of Fatima in light of a writer's investment in a particular constituency's perspective on events and putting forward a vision of communal identity. Djébar advocates for early Muslim women who were silenced and for women of her own generation, "as if contemporary women, nameless or known, are observing from the wings."¹⁴⁹

CLASSICAL SUNNI SOURCES

In *Far from Madina*, Djébar uses established conventions of classical Islamic scholarship and links her work to the tradition while at the same introducing female

¹⁴⁸ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 179-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962, 1983, 2009), 127 and 147. Whether the practice of ijtihad is valid and acceptable in the modern age is a matter of debate. Traditionists tend to prefer a reliance on earlier legal discourse and place strict limits on its use. Some call the solidification of the Sunni legal canon in the second century of the hijra the point at which the door of ijtihad was closed. For more discussion see Stowasser, 5-7 and Dahlia Eissa, "Constructing the Notion of Male Superiority over Women in Islam: The Influence of Sex and Gender Stereotyping in the Interpretation of the Qur'an and the Implications for a Modern Exegesis of Rights," *Women Living under Muslim Laws* (November, 1999): 5-51; Shaista P. Ali-Karamali and Fiona Dunne, "The Ijtihad Controversy," *Arab Law Quarterly* 9:3 (1994): 238-257.

¹⁴⁹ Djébar, *Far From Madina*, xv.

voices that undermine the boundaries of that canon. In a subversive move, the novel both affirms and revises tradition. In the introduction to the text, Djébar names the three classical sources written by Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham, Ibn Sa'd and al-Tabari, which provide the material for her reimagining of the Islamic past. She uses the limited reports on Islam's earliest women left behind in these texts as inspiration for an exploration of events through their eyes and in order to articulate a narrative that will answer back to constructions in the canonical accounts. *Far from Madina* presents stories in the form of vignettes organized around single characters, much like the capsule biographies found in biographical dictionaries, an important genre of Islamic scholarship to which Ibn Sa'd's work belongs. Djébar gathers known details about a woman, reconstructs the scene of the event where the woman was mentioned, usually from her point of view, and presents this consideration as worthy of selection and inclusion in a compendium of notable persons. Djébar also makes reference to chains of transmission in her work, sometimes preserving conflicting accounts of events and attributing each to their respective sources. In these instances she is again placing her work within the frame of the standards of scholarship employed by the texts whose version of events she is attempting unseat. On other occasions, Djébar employs the notion of chains of transmission in the form of human relationships. For example, she places the child Urwa ibn al-Zubayr, the future transmitter of a story, in the company of his Aunt Aisha bint Abi Bakr narrating an episode from her life with the Prophet in the midst of everyday life.¹⁵⁰ By this move, Djébar places the important practice of hadith transmission in female spaces. Through

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 32.

these gestures borrowed from the domain of classical Islamic scholarship, Djébar attempts to legitimate her interpolation of recovered female voices into early Islamic narrative.

Djébar's classical Islamic sources include Ibn Hisham's (d. 835) recension of Ibn Ishaq's (d. 761) prophetic biography, *Life of the Prophet Muhammad*,¹⁵¹ Ibn Sa'd's (d. 845) biographical dictionary, *al-Tabaqat al-Kabir*¹⁵² and al-Tabari's (d. 923) massive, multi-volume historical chronicles, *Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk* or *Tarikh al-Tabari*.¹⁵³ Notably, Djébar does not explicitly state that she will engage the hadith canon or the Qur'an at the outset of the novel. The selected works belong to the realm of historiography, and taking creative license with their narratives poses a less overt challenge to Islamic authority than would a project posing a direct challenge to the Qur'an or the hadith literature.¹⁵⁴ The narrative of *Far from Madina* is not in binary opposition to the sacred texts, rather the novel takes as its focus the project of foregrounding the contingent and contested way in which orthodoxy formed outside the

¹⁵¹ Ibn Ishaq and Abd al-Malik Ibn Hisham, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, trans. A. Guillaume, (Lahore, Pakistan Branch: Oxford University Press, 1955, 2011 Printing).

¹⁵² Ibn Sa'd original work is an eight volume set. For this project I am looking at an English translation of volumes one and two which cover the Prophetic biography and his military campaigns as well as an abridged version of a translation of the eighth volume devoted to women. Muḥammad S. Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir Vol I & II*, ed. and trans. Moinul Haq, and H. K. Ghazanfar (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1993). Muhammad Ibn Sa'd, *The Women of Madina*, ed. and trans. Aisha Abdurrahman Bewley (London: Ta-Ha, 2004).

¹⁵³ Al-Tabari's History of Prophets and Kings is a forty volume compendium. Fatima is only marginally treated in its pages. The volumes relied upon for this study follow. Abu Jafar Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Biographies of the Prophet's Companions and their Successors*, Vol. 39, trans. Ella Landau-Tasseron (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) 166-169; Abu Jafar Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *The Last Years of the Prophet: The Formation of the State A.D. 630-632/A.H. 8-11*, Vol. 9, trans. Ismail K. Poonawala (Albany : State University of New York Press, 1988), 187, n 1291; Abu Jafar Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *The Conquest of Arabia, A. D. 632-633 - A. H. 11*, Vol. 10, trans. Fred Donner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

¹⁵⁴ It should be noted that in interviews Djébar does state that this work is meant to answer back to those interpreters who say that the Qur'an requires veiling for all women, Zimra, "Not so Far from Madina," 824.

scriptural domain and the manner in which Islamic authority solidified in the hands of elite male scholars after the death of the Prophet.

Even though Djebbar does not name the hadith literature as a source at the opening of the novel, she does overtly cite one of the canon's central scholars, Bukhari, within the text. Further, there is considerable overlap in source material between the hadith and the historiographical sources she does name. These bodies of literature developed in parallel and compiled much of the same circulating material. The *Tabaqat* for example, includes many reports that also filled out the hadith canon.¹⁵⁵ While all early Islamic literature was shaped to some extent by the worldviews and biases of the authors who passed down the reports, distinct genres have been subject to different standards of authenticity. The hadith literature, or the tradition that collected the sayings and deeds of the Prophet in discrete units known as *matn* along with detailed chains of transmitters known as *isnads*, has been subject to the most rigorous tests of authenticity and systematic criticism. While these reports were not written down at the time that the Prophet performed the deeds or spoke the words reported in them, the chains of transmission were meant to provide eye witness assurance that a report was authentic.¹⁵⁶ Nonetheless it was not uncommon for warring factions of Muslims to proliferate reports in order to enshrine in

¹⁵⁵ Riswi S. Faizer, "The Issue of Authenticity Regarding the Traditions of al-Waqidi as Established in His Kitab al-Maghazi," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 58: 2 (1999): 97.

¹⁵⁶ There are many theories and positions on whether or not hadith reports were written down by the first generation of Muslims and the debate is an ongoing question. The subject will receive further treatment in chapter three. Many Western scholars take the view that the earliest hadith materials were only beginning to be set down in writing one hundred and fifty to two hundred and fifty years after the unfolding of the events they report. From this view, by 700 CE, the writing down of hadith traditions became the norm. Brown, 23. Other literary forms built on akhbar material were thought to have begun to be written down in the mid eight century CE. Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 24-25.

narrative their version of historical events.¹⁵⁷ In the ninth century, Sunni scholars such as Bukhari undertook efforts to vet hadith reports employing modes of critique that aimed to discredit spurious reports and identify a body of authentic or “sound” hadith. Within a few centuries, six major works of sound hadith were adopted by Sunnis and formed the basis of religious and legal orthodoxy.¹⁵⁸

Why Djebbar does not claim confrontation with this canon that forms the basis of schools of law and acts as a normative force within Islamic society, despite the fact that she surely believes that it too is a constructed narrative, is worth considering.¹⁵⁹ A likely explanation is that she wants to avoid alignment with the body of Western Orientalist scholarship that placed a major focus on discounting the authenticity of this canon in opposition to an Islamic tradition that has defended its authenticity or offered critique on its own terms. The work of some Western scholars to prove the hadith canon spurious has extended to question whether a historical Islamic community even existed.¹⁶⁰ Djebbar’s aim is not to undermine Islam and she is not ultimately interested in proving or disproving origins or getting at the facts of history. In the novel, Djebbar describes the genre thus, “A hadith is never completely certain. But it traces, in the gap in our questioning faith, the perfect curve of a meteor glimpsed in the dark sky.”¹⁶¹ From her

¹⁵⁷ Brown, 3-4.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 38-40. Despite this settling of the canon, efforts to achieve a final authentication of the traditions remain an ongoing, contested matter. The “Six Books” include *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, *Sahīh Mulsim*, *Sunan al-Sughra* of al-Nasā’ī, *Sunan Abi Dawūd*, *Jāmi’ al-Tirmidhī* and *Sunan ibn Majah*.

¹⁵⁹ Djebbar does in fact mention Bukhari by name in her text and references his narrations. See Djebbar, *Far From Madina*, 51.

¹⁶⁰ R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 81-89.

¹⁶¹ Djebbar, *Far From Madina*, 52.

perspective, the past is irretrievable as a fixed set of facts and she is instead engaged with the way that the past has been represented and what inspiration and empowerment it might offer today. Her project unfolds in the Islamic context and embraces forms and personages of Islamic tradition to legitimate her project. It is worth noting also that it is in the process of hadith transmission that women's voices are preserved in Islamic narrative, a motif Djébar engages extensively in the novel. Despite the fact that she does not mention it directly, Djébar's work can be read in tension with the hadith tradition that, once written down, served as the basis for law.¹⁶²

The sources of early Islamic historiography that Djébar does claim to be in direct conversation with were not subject to the same standards of authenticity that were applied to the prophetic traditions. Further, it is well known that these chroniclers transmitted their accounts through lenses of authorship and historicity that entailed a conscious reshaping of narrative.¹⁶³ One of the main components of these works were *akhbar* reports, units of narration similar to hadith but of lesser reputation and addressing topics beyond the words and deeds of the Prophet.¹⁶⁴ In the eighth century, *akhbar* reports began to be assembled along with chronological information to form the first works of

¹⁶² An exception or perhaps better put, nuance to this statement is that it has been argued that the Malikis are an example of school that placed higher importance on non-textual sources known as 'amal, or "inherited practice of the people of Madina" than on hadith literature as a source of guidance and law. See Yasin Dutton, "'Amal v Hadith in Islamic Law the Case of Sadl al-Yadayn (Holding One's Hands by One's Sides) When Doing Prayer," *Islamic Law and Society* 3:1 (1996):14, 13-40.

¹⁶³ Humphreys, 81.

¹⁶⁴ It should also be noted that prior to canonization, hadith literature was seen as including reports of sayings belonging to Companions, not just those of the Prophet. The adoption of the idea of the Prophetic sunna as the sole topic of the hadith literature developed with the canon itself. This topic will be discussed further in chapter 3. See Adis Duderija, "Evolution in the Canonical Sunni Hadith Body of Literature and the Concept of an Authentic Hadith During the Formative Period of Islamic Thought as Based on Recent Western Scholarship," *Arab Law Quarterly* 23:4 (2009): 389-314.

historiography. Circulating akhbar reports were accompanied by isnads of varying completeness and reliability, while some had none at all.¹⁶⁵ Whether compiled materials were oral transmissions, already written reports or newly created material remains a question for historians today. Whether or not reports were genuine, chroniclers treated authorship as a fluid concept and tended to compile and render handed down narratives in the light of contemporary questions, their sectarian leanings and the interests of their patrons. This resulted in the production of consciously-constructed versions of events.

The earliest of Djebbar's sources, Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham's *Life of Muhammad*, is considered the "first great Prophetic biography."¹⁶⁶ The work, part of a genre known as the *sira*, chronologically arranges episodes from the Prophet's life from a variety of sources. It relies heavily upon and is preceded by another literary form that narrated military campaigns, a genre known as *maghazi*.¹⁶⁷ Originally written by Ibn Ishaq (d. 761), Ibn Hisham (d. 835) reshaped and transmitted the only surviving version. It is impossible to untangle the authorship of these two writers. The *sira* is made up of hadith reports that were collected before standards of authenticity were in place, including the requirement that they be accompanied by isnads. As such, chains of transmissions only occasionally accompany units of narration contained therein. The work also compiles folklore, akhbar reports known as *Israiliyat* from Christians and Jews often reflecting their own traditions, as well as many miraculous and legendary tales.¹⁶⁸ Composed at an

¹⁶⁵ Robinson, 15-16, 22-26.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 26.

¹⁶⁷ Brown, 13; Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham, xiv; Faizer, 99.

¹⁶⁸ Brown, 12 and 86; Robinson, 65.

early date in the evolution of Islamic literary genres, this work also represents a view on the Prophet's life before it was taken as providing "legal precedents and a cultural paradigm more generally."¹⁶⁹

Djebar also draws upon Ibn Sa'd's (d. 845) *Tabaqat*, the earliest surviving biographical dictionary, a genre of Islamic literature that emerged in the ninth century CE that compiled and presented capsules on notable individuals. Ibn Sa'd's included a biography of the Prophet and entries on his companions and transmitters. Researchers have linked the development of this genre to the rise of hadith criticism and analysis of their isnads, a pre-Islamic interest in genealogy and a developing interest in chronography.¹⁷⁰ Ibn Sa'd's biographical dictionary compiled elements from a variety of sources including hadith traditions, works like Ibn Ishaq's and written texts of unknown authority.¹⁷¹ Biographical dictionaries, like the *sira*, often contained reports accompanied by chains of transmission that were not subject to serious critique as well as non-hadith sources without isnads, including miraculous accounts.¹⁷²

Al-Tabari's (d. 923) historical chronicles, among the most remarkable contributions to Islamic historiography in the tenth century, were also primary sources for Djebar's novel. This voluminous work narrated for the first time a history that stretched from creation through the Islamic present. In this grand project, al-Tabari cites earlier works such as those of Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Sa'd and a variety of oral and written sources.

¹⁶⁹ Robinson, 29-30.

¹⁷⁰ Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: from Ibn Sa'd to Who's Who*, 4-5.

¹⁷¹ For a discussion of the reliability resulting from the influence of Ibn Sa'd's main teacher, al-Waqidi see Faizer, 98-100.

¹⁷² Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: from Ibn Sa'd to Who's Who*, 15, 16.

While al-Tabari's *Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk* preserved conflicting reports on controversial events, it also reflected a narrative approach not limited to the faithful repetition of reports or empirical facts. Al-Tabari selected and arranged materials and supplemented "general information that was presumably circulating at the time" according to the needs of his project.¹⁷³ The work is structured by teleological assumptions, retelling pre-Islamic events in light of the prophetic narrative with the aim of creating a version of history that posits divine causality as the explanation for the path of Islamic society's development.¹⁷⁴ Further, the overarching narrative "coherence" found in the chronicles points to the fact that:

...late ninth- and tenth-century compilers impressed their vision upon the material not merely by selecting and arranging pre-existing *akhbar*, but by breaking them up, by rephrasing, supplementing and composing anew.¹⁷⁵

THE BIOGRAPHY OF FATIMA BINT MUHAMMAD

All renderings of Fatima derive in some respect from this early canon of constructed literature. While the certainty of these sources cannot be authenticated, there are basic elements of the accounts that are widely accepted by most historians. The basic pieces of information include the fact that Fatima was born to Muhammad ibn Abdullah and Khadija bint Khuwaylid ibn Asad in Mecca approximately five years before the

¹⁷³ Ghada Osman, "Oral vs. Written Transmission: The Case of Tabari and Ibn Sa'd," *Arabica* 48: 1 (2001): 67-69.

¹⁷⁴ Robinson, 121 and 131.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

beginning of her father's prophetic career.¹⁷⁶ She married Ali ibn Abi Talib, cousin of the Prophet who was chosen for her over other suitors, within a year or two of the migration to Madina. She experienced a life of poverty and hardship. She gave birth to four children, Hasan, Hussein, Zaynab and Umm Kulthum.¹⁷⁷ The Prophet felt special affection for her, attested to in particular reports. After his death, she was denied the right to inherit his property by the second caliph, Abu Bakr. Finally, Fatima is believed to have died three to nine months after the Prophet in Madina where she was buried.¹⁷⁸

The discussions of Fatima in the works of Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Hisham, Ibn Sa'd and al-Tabari most often place her on the margins of historical events, paint her as a passive observer or emphasize her familial roles. While the *sira* recounts a variety of episodes involving women, Fatima is almost entirely absent from the pages of this work, appearing marginally in only four entries. These scenes report marital strife between Ali and Fatima and Ali's nickname "father of the dust," find Fatima screening her father while he washes, recount that Muhammad and Ali asked Fatima to wash their swords after the Battle of Uhud, and retell how those who did not immediately give allegiance to Abu Bakr after the Prophet's death, namely the Prophet's family, were gathered at Fatima's house when there was a major confrontation with Umar, though she herself is not

¹⁷⁶ The Encyclopaedia of Islam entry on Fatima notes that there are some historians who place Fatima's birth five or six years earlier. Both al-Tabari and Ibn Sa'd posit her birth five years before Muhammad's prophecy. Vaglieri, "Fāṭima;" Ibn Sa'd, *The Women of Madina*, 13; al-Tabari, *Biographies of the Prophet's Companions and their Successors*, 166.

¹⁷⁷ Shi'i sources suggest that there was a fifth child, a son thought to have been miscarried after the Prophet's death. See Vaglieri, "Fatima" and Soufie, 88-89 for information on Fatima's children.

¹⁷⁸ Summary of Fatima's biography derives from Valigeri, "Fāṭima;" Klemm; Soufie; Ibn Sa'd, *The Women of Madina*, 13-21, and al-Tabari. *Biographies of the Prophet's Companions and their Successors*, 166-167.

invoked.¹⁷⁹ This last event will be treated below. al-Tabari's *Tarikh* also offers limited references on Fatima's life. There is a short entry on Fatima in his *Biographies of the Prophet's Companions and their Successors*, but this information is limited to points about her birth, marriage, death and burial.¹⁸⁰ His chronicles offer glimpses of Fatima in only a few narrations, topics which will be discussed in the pages that follow. Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqat*, in addition to mentioning women on the sidelines of entries and in isnads throughout the work, devotes a full volume to female Companions of the Prophet and female transmitters.¹⁸¹ Ibn Sa'd emphasized the importance of family ties by opening this volume with an entry on the Prophet's first wife Khadija followed by entries on his daughters and one granddaughter, but his treatment of Fatima is brief. She appears in only a few passages besides her own entry which mostly repeat the content that is found in the capsule devoted to her. The additional topics include two different accounts of the poverty and deprivation experienced by the Prophet and his family.¹⁸² Also, Ibn Sa'd makes mention of the Prophet's reference to her as an example in exhorting the community, "O Fatimah daughter of Muhammad! O Safiyyah aunt of Muhammad! Do (good) deeds because I shall not be of any avail with Allah for you."¹⁸³ There are also reports of Fatima's mourning for her father as well as lamentations which appeal to her figure.¹⁸⁴ All in all, she is rarely represented by Ibn Sa'd outside the family context.

¹⁷⁹ Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham, 286, 389, 551, 683.

¹⁸⁰ al-Tabari, *Biographies of the Prophet's Companions and their Successors*, 166-169.

¹⁸¹ Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: from Ibn Sa'd to Who's Who*, 18.

¹⁸² Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir Vol I*, 215, 417.

¹⁸³ Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir Vol. II*, 268.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 388, 420, 426-428.

This treatment portrays Fatima as a person whose historical importance and public presence was limited.¹⁸⁵

TEXTUAL COMPARISONS

Despite its limitations, Ibn Sa'd's entry on Fatima does represent the earliest attempt to collect information about Fatima into one rendering.¹⁸⁶ It is a reverent portrayal that maintains a focus on Fatima's role as wife and daughter.¹⁸⁷ Narrations included in it revolve around Fatima's betrothal, marriage, her life in poverty, domestic disputes with her husband, and finally, her death. Ibn Sa'd also brings into relief the close relationship between Fatima and her father. This closeness is apparent in discussions of the Prophet's mediation between Ali and Fatima,¹⁸⁸ his desire to have them living close by¹⁸⁹ and his involvement in their domestic situation generally. The most evocative scene that Ibn Sa'd narrates is the exchange between Fatima and her father during his last illness wherein he shares the news that his death is near, reported by Aisha's witness. The report follows:

She ('Ayishah) said: Verily, in his last illness, the Apostle of Allah, May Allah bless him, called his daughter Fatima, and secretly told her something; and she wept. Then he called her again and secretly spoke to her about something and she laughed. She ('Ayishah) said: I asked her about it. She replied: The Apostle of Allah, may Allah bless him, had communicated to me that he would die of that

¹⁸⁵ Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: from Ibn Sa'd to Who's Who*, 23 and Vaglieri, "Fāṭima."

¹⁸⁶ Klemm, 186.

¹⁸⁷ Notably the biographical entry does not emphasize Fatima's role as mother, the fact of her having children receives only a two line mention. Ibn Sa'd, 18. Though Ibn Sa'd does devote volume five to the Prophet's grandchildren, his depiction of Fatima does not emphasize them.

¹⁸⁸ Ibn Sa'd, *The Women of Madina*, 18.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

illness, so I wept. Then he communicated to me that I would be the first of his family to join him, so I laughed.¹⁹⁰

Ibn Sa'd preserved two other version of this event, one that quotes the Prophet giving his daughter the appellation, "mistress of this community, or the women of the worlds"¹⁹¹ and one that offers a different title "chief of the women of paradise next to Maryam Bint Imran."¹⁹² Both of these formulations are cited and developed in future narratives that elaborate on Fatima's piety and exceptional character, qualities which served as a basis for the idealization of her person and her life.

Djebar takes up this scene in *Far from Madina*, following closely these classical accounts. However, interestingly, she attributes her sourcing to Bukhari, again stepping outside the set of texts she mentioned in her introduction. Djebar says that he "verified" this incident, so perhaps she cites Bukhari's hadith because it is more authoritative.¹⁹³ In any case, Bukhari's version is very similar to Ibn Sa'd's:

Narrated 'Aisha: The Prophet called his daughter Fatima during his illness in which he died, and told her a secret whereupon she wept. Then he called her again and told her a secret whereupon she laughed. When I asked her about that, she replied, "The Prophet spoke to me in secret and informed me that he would die in the course of the illness during which he died, so I wept. He again spoke to me in secret and informed me that I would be the first of his family to follow him (after his death) and on that I laughed."¹⁹⁴

Djebar's version of this scene does not contest or revise any of the basic elements of this report. Hers is a close reading. Djebar's rendition differs by the contextualizing details

¹⁹⁰ Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir Vol. II*, 308. Also a very similar report appears on page 240.

¹⁹¹ Ibn Sa'd, *The Women of Madina*, 19.

¹⁹² Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir Vol. II*, 309-310.

¹⁹³ Djebar, *Far From Madina*, 51.

¹⁹⁴ Muḥammad ibn Ismail Bukhari, *The Translation of the meanings of Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: Arabic-English*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Lahore: Kazi Publications, 1979), v. 5, bk. 57, no. 62.

that she adds which make the report less informative and more of a story. These details highlight the fact that the event is narrated through a construction of Aisha's point of view. Djebbar establishes the scene in Aisha's space:

A few weeks, perhaps a few days before his death, when he is already unable to leave Aisha's apartment, the Prophet receives a visit from Fatima. His young wife draws aside, most probably out of discretion and modesty, and watches the scene from a little distance.¹⁹⁵

The above quote is followed by Djebbar's rendition of the actual report, which follows the contours of classical reports to a more intense emotional degree, moving away from the language of reportage that characterizes classical sources. In the novel, Fatima "is shaken by uncontrollable tears...lacerates her flesh, while her father makes no response." Then, Djebbar sketches Aisha seeing "Father and daughter...sharing in the unexpected happiness that seems to filter through and finally spread everywhere." Afterwards, again Djebbar points to the Prophet's young wife, "Aisha watches. Scarcely eighteen...remains at a distance," and adds details addressing what Aisha must of have felt watching the pair, further emphasizing the fact that we learn of this scene through Aisha's point of view. While classical reports do preserve the attribution of reports to Aisha that no doubt point to her having witnessed the events contained therein, Djebbar's project attempts to foreground this fact and to more fully explore the Islamic past through the female gaze.

In a number of scenes a distinct contrast is observable between these early Sunni sources which emphasize passivity and family contexts, and Djebbar's depiction, which constructs Fatima as a vocal figure of rebellion that challenged early Islamic authority for

¹⁹⁵ Djebbar, *Far From Madina*, 51.

the sake of all Muslim women. In what follows I will offer comparisons of the chroniclers' and Djebbar's texts in order to illustrate the point. The first of such scenes is one not found in the aforementioned historiographic sources, again deriving rather from the hadith literature.¹⁹⁶ In this scene, Fatima's husband Ali decides to take a second wife and makes the request for Juwayriya, the daughter of Abu Jahl,¹⁹⁷ an enemy of Islam, but also the niece of a faithful Muslim military leader. Muhammad refuses Ali permission to complete the marriage. Bukhari, canonical Sunni hadith scholar, preserves three accounts of this episode. These reports consistently mention that Muhammad denied permission on the basis that Juwayriya was the daughter of an enemy and in saying that Fatima was a "part of me" who he did not want to see suffer trials. One such report is as follows:

I heard Allah's Apostle who was on the pulpit saying, 'Banu Hisham bin Al-Mughira have requested me to allow them to marry their daughter to 'Ali bin Abu Talib, but I don't give permission, and will not give permission unless 'Ali bin Abi Talib divorces my daughter in order to marry their daughter, because Fatima is a part of my body, and I hate what she hates to see, and what hurts her, hurts me.'¹⁹⁸

Just one account places Fatima in the report itself saying that when she heard about it she went to her father and said, "Your people think that you do not become angry for the

¹⁹⁶ I did not find this event in any of the three historiographers' accounts. Djebbar also names and refers to classical hadith scholar Bukhari within the novel as one of her sources, beyond the three named in her introduction. See for example Djebbar, 51. In the case of Ali's request for a second wife, Djebbar does not mention the source from which she is deriving this report.

¹⁹⁷ Interestingly, Djebbar's text refers to this woman by her first name, Juwayria, and as the daughter of Abu Jahl. Bukhari names her only as the daughter of Abu Jahl. I verified that this was indeed her first name by consulting Ibn Sa'd biographical dictionary where it is confirmed that "she was the woman to whom Ali ibn Abi Talib proposed." Her full name was Juwayriya bint Abi Jahl ibn Hisham. Djebbar's project in this chapter was to depict Fatima's experience and distress, but this need not be at the expense of the woman being asked for by Ali. Djebbar made sure to bring her out from the shadows of anonymity and to refer to her specifically by her first name. Djebbar, *Far from Madina*, 60; Ibn Sad, *The Women of Madina*, 184.

¹⁹⁸ Bukhari, v. 4, bk. 53, no. 342, v. 5, bk. 57, no. 76, v. 7, bk. 62, no. 157. The quoted material is v. 7, bk. 62, no. 157.

sake of your daughters as Ali is now going to marry the daughter of Abu Jahl,” whereupon the report proceeded as above with Muhammad publically denying Ali permission.¹⁹⁹

Djebar foregoes the distant narrative tone of the hadith and imbues this scene with emotion and conflict positing it as an event of importance to all Muslims. In her version the narrator is both witnessing the event and has access to the interiority of the characters in the scene. As the news of Ali’s decision reaches Fatima, the “short sentence eats into her like a drop of icy poison.”²⁰⁰ By the time Fatima finds her father she is in a state of numbness and can only murmur to him the dark news. Djebar describes Fatima’s composure and gives voice to her internal dialogue.

Fatima remains standing in the doorway with set face, simply repeating to the Prophet the short sentence, in all its neutrality, ‘Ali wants to marry again!’...What use to add contemptuously, ‘the daughter of the enemy of God!’ Fatima remains standing, her face contorted by her effort not to weep, not to protest.²⁰¹

Djebar goes further to explore how Fatima might have thought about this distressing turn of events in the frame of the wider context of women’s position at the time. The narration continues, “Does she think at this moment, ‘What can I do?’ Is this not the natural law of men? Is it not ‘Her’ fate, as a woman...The law that the Qur’an has recently validated.” Djebar depicts Fatima as conscious that this dilemma is a burden for all Muslim women and a structural problem of Islam. The narrator continues, “Fatima seems to be thinking, ‘Is it really from my young husband that I receive this blow, is it

¹⁹⁹ Bukhari. v. 5, bk. 57, no. 76.

²⁰⁰ Djebar, *Far From Madina*, 61.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

not from you, my father, you, the Apostle of God?" Djebbar constructs Fatima in awareness of the fact that her opponent is not her husband but rather the authority of her father who has conveyed the verse that permits four wives. A day later, Muhammad delivers a speech at prayers saying that the marriage will not be permitted in tones much like Bukhari's reports, citing that Fatima is part of him and "what hurts her, hurts me."²⁰² But Djebbar does not stop here. In her account, the prayers proceed and after them Muhammad is moved to speak a second time, saying like one of Bukhari's reports, that he doesn't forbid what Allah has permitted or permit what has been forbidden, but...²⁰³ Djebbar takes this opening to depict the Prophet as increasingly upset at the prospect of this fate befalling his daughter and utters again a resolute forbiddance and a "no, never!....Never!"²⁰⁴

The significance that Djebbar derives from this scene is that Muhammad's refusal was not confined to the case of Fatima. Rather than being a woman set apart from others by distinctions that no other women could hope to attain Djebbar is arguing that Fatima is a real woman, has feelings like all women. Djebbar is challenging the way that tradition has selectively treated these characters as precedents. She suggests that Muhammad said no to all the men of Madina and also to all generations of men who take his actions as precedent. The novel asks:

To whom did Muhammad say 'No' that day in Madina?...to Ali...to the men of Madina, to all who listened to him, who asked him for advice, those (and not only they but their young sons also, who were frequently attentive onlookers and

²⁰² Ibid., 63.

²⁰³ Bukhari. *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, v. 4, bk. 53, no. 342.

²⁰⁴ Djebbar, *Far From Madina*, 63.

would speak of these things later), those who were to model their lives on His life, hanging on the least of the Messenger's words.²⁰⁵

She also suggests that Muhammad said "No" to himself, to "the father in him," and that he was forced to reflect on his "spiritual confusion" as he was confronted with the pain that polygamy caused women. The final point that Djébar presses in this scene is that Fatima learned to say "no," or to rebel, from her father, a transmission that would seem to sanction her actions. The narrator continues, "Fatima will echo this 'No', magnified, multiplied, two or three years later, not indeed to defend her position as a wife...She will say 'no' on the behalf of everyone."

Another important scene wherein Djébar places Fatima at the center of events in contrast to chroniclers who overlooked her point of view retells a confrontation with Umar. Both al-Tabari and the *sira* report on the fact that a group of Muslims whose loyalties were with the Prophet's family refused to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr after the death of the Prophet. Since, according to Sunni sources, the Prophet did not make a public announcement to say who should succeed him in leadership, the issue became contentious after his death. Most accounts suggest that Abu Bakr swiftly assumed leadership while the Prophet's family was concerned with the rites of death, burial and mourning. After the decision was made, the family withheld their support, feeling that they should have been consulted and that they also had a claim to succession, and their supporters stood with them. Upon this occasion, neither of these two sources gives an account that attributes words to Fatima or gives news of her state. The *sira* does not

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 64.

emphasize familial involvement and instead speaks of a group of *Ansar* withholding support that included Ali who “separated themselves in Fatima’s house while the rest of the Muharijīn gathered around Abu Bakr.”²⁰⁶ In this account, Abu Bakr approaches this group himself and they offer their allegiance without heightened conflict. Al-Tabari transmits the more volatile incident where Umar threatened members gathered at Fatima’s home. According to this account,

‘Umar b. al-Khattab came to the house of ‘Ali. Talhah, al-Zubayr, and some of the Muhajirūn were [also] in the house [with ‘Ali]. ‘Umar cried out, “By God, either you come out to render the oath of allegiance ‘to Abu Bakr], or I will set the house on fire.” Al-Zubayr came out with his sword drawn As he stumbled [upon something], the sword fell from his hand, so they jumped over him and seized him.²⁰⁷

Though al-Tabari does not mention Fatima, his translator, Ismail Poonawala, cites in a footnote other medieval Sunni historians who reported that when Umar threatened to burn down Fatima’s house while the family was inside, that “[t]he scene grew violent and Fatimah was furious.”²⁰⁸

In retelling these events, Djebbar restores the voice of Fatima, so noticeably absent from the chroniclers’ accounts. In Djebbar’s version, “Umar cries, ‘come out, or else I burn down the house with all who are within’”²⁰⁹ and Fatima emerges from the house to challenge him and face his threats. Fatima publicly accuses Umar of political

²⁰⁶ Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah*, 683-687.

²⁰⁷ al-Tabari, *The Last Years of the Prophet: The Formation of the State A.D. 630-632/A.H. 8-11*, Vol. 9, 186-187,

²⁰⁸ Among the medieval historians Poonawala mentions is Baladhuri, al-Tabari, *The Last Years of the Prophet: The Formation of the State A.D. 630-632/A.H. 8-11*, Vol. 9, 187, n 1291.

²⁰⁹ Djebbar, *Far From Madina*, 65-66.

maneuvering and unseemly hastiness at a time when her family mourned, tended to the Prophet's corpse and remained by the grave.

Fatima came to the door of her house and addressed Umar and his followers thus: 'You left the Prophet's body in our hands while you were busy settling everything among yourselves alone! You did not wait for what we had to say and you did not concern yourself with our rights!

Not only does does Djebbar's Fatima claim she has been denied her rights, she also invokes her father against Umar and his company. The novel narrates, "She cries out, loud enough to be heard by all in the street outside, 'O my father! O Messenger of God! What have Umar and the son of Quhaifa done to us after your departure?'" Djebbar also conjures Fatima confronting Abu Bakr for his "haste" and for binding Ali to pledge allegiance in the event of her death. In the novel Fatima states, "So O Abu Bakr, you are in such haste that you even attack the Prophet's own kin! Allah is my witness!"²¹⁰ In this period before her own death arrives, Djebbar posits that "Fatima is very much alive," contesting the new order imposed upon the community. In challenging both caliphs, Djebbar positions Fatima as transcending personal relationships, and as challenging "men of power."²¹¹ In confronting Umar, Fatima is speaking back to a figure known for harsh treatment of and repressive policies toward women. Fatima is a courageous figure who voices communal doubt around the question of succession. According to Djebbar, Fatima questions not only for the rights of her family, but strikes deeper at the root of order and asks, who has the right to succession, the right to claim absolute authority? As the sole

²¹⁰ Ibid., 67.

²¹¹ Ibid., 74

living heir to Muhammad's lineage, Fatima embodies the fact that women are excluded from this domain of power.

Another narration preserved by both al-Tabari and Ibn Sa'd surrounding Abu Bakr's refusal to turn over to Fatima what she believed was her rightful inheritance, lands in Fadak and the Prophet's share of tribute from Khaybar,²¹² is a pivotal scene in Djebar's depiction of Fatima. Ibn Sa'd preserves five different reports.²¹³ In one version, "Fatima came to Abu Bakr and demanded her share in the inheritance."²¹⁴ In another version, "Fatimah, the daughter of the Apostle of Allah...sent (a message) to Abu Bakr asking him about her share in the inheritance of the Apostle of Allah."²¹⁵ In all of Ibn Sa'd accounts Abu Bakr refuses Fatima on the basis that the Prophet said he did not leave inheritance. One report shows Fatima speaking back, "I am heir to Fadak, Khaybar and his sadaqat at al-Madina, as your daughters will be your heirs when you die."²¹⁶ One report concludes that she "became angry,"²¹⁷ another that "she became angry" and "did not talk to him [Abu Bakr] again till she died."²¹⁸ Ibn Sa'd also preserves separate, conflicting reports that say that Abu Bakr was allowed to visit Fatima during her illness,

²¹² Fadak and Khaybar were former Jewish territories neighboring Medina. These lands were secured by the Muslims through treaty agreements. Fadak was "allocated to Muhammad" the proceeds from which also supported a variety of needy individuals and produce from Khaybar was split amongst the Muslims and Muhammad received a share. L. Veccia Vaglieri, "Fadak." *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2011. Brill Online.

²¹³ Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir Vol II*, 392-394 and Ibn Sa'd, *The Women of Madina*, 20.

²¹⁴ Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir Vol II*, 393.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 392.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 393.

²¹⁷ Ibn Sa'd, *The Women of Madina*, 20.

²¹⁸ Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir Vol II*, 392.

and pray over her body at her funeral.²¹⁹ Al-Tabari reports just one narration involving Fatima which follows the same outline as Ibn Sa'd's above. At the end of the encounter al-Tabari's report concludes, "Fatima shunned him and did not speak to him about it until she died. Ali buried her at night and did not permit Abu Bakr to attend [her burial]."²²⁰

In the novel, Djebbar takes the opportunity of these reports to elaborate on Fatima's response and to further render Fatima as a vocal critic of the new authority and as a defender of rights for women. In this version, Fatima raises the matter of Abu Bakr denying her the right to inheritance from the level of the private and individual to the level of the public and collective. Djebbar's treatment foregoes the male chronicler's gaze and explores the incident through Fatima's point of view.²²¹ When Abu Bakr denies her one of the basic rights and protections that the Qur'an had set down for women, she sees it as a sweeping injustice. Firstly, Fatima believes that Abu Bakr's argument is a "specious" one.²²² Djebbar's Fatima sees clearly that when the Prophet said that he did not leave inheritance that this pointed to his prophetic abilities. Secondly, Djebbar makes clear that the issue Fatima champions is not just her personal inheritance.²²³ The novel describes her view thus,

It is not a question of a garden, or lands, or possessions in Madina and its surroundings. No! as Fatima understands it, it is something symbolic and much more serious. The ascetic Fatima, who experienced more days of privations than

²¹⁹ Ibn Sa'd, *The Women of Madina*, 19-20.

²²⁰ al-Tabari, *The Last Years of the Prophet: The Formation of the State A.D. 630-632/A.H. 8-11*, Vol 9, 196-197.

²²¹ To be clear, one of the reports does name Aisha as the narrator, Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir Vol II*, 392.

²²² Djebbar, *Far From Madina*, 67.

²²³ For further discussion of the how medieval scholars treated this question of inheritance, the reports they preserved, significance of the issue and differences between Sunni and Shi'i traditions, see Soufie, 91-104.

of abundance in Madina, Fatima who, now that she is orphaned, cares less than ever for material comforts! ²²⁴

Fatima witnesses the outright contravention of the rules of Islam and senses a threatening trend for women. In her outrage, Fatima sees herself as “the first of an endless procession of daughters” to endure this kind of “*de facto* dispossession” under the new trajectory of Islamic authority.

Fatima is denied her inheritance which is symbolic of her basic rights under Islam. As such she is dispossessed of what she sees as the true Islam, one that in her vision would scrutinize Abu Bakr’s judgment and recognize not simply her material claim but rather her full agency. When Fatima questioned “which Islam is not dead?” she highlighted the fact that what defines Islam in communal and social terms is an interpretive matter.²²⁵ She questioned and thus drew attention to the fact of the consolidation of interpretive authority in the hands of a small few to exclusion of all others. In evoking the generations who followed after Fatima in enduring dispossession, Djebbar is pointing to the fact women have historically been denied the right to interpret Islamic scripture and tradition and further, that they have been denied the history of female agency in the community of faith. By contributing this depiction, Djebbar seizes the right to reinterpret the Islamic past and attempts to restore Fatima’s precedent as a vocal woman who challenged authority as inheritance for all Muslim women.

In a remarkable twist, Djebbar goes on to present Fatima delivering a long eloquent speech to Abu Bakr and others Madinans gathered in a public forum. This speech is

²²⁴ Djebbar, *Far From Madina*, 68.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

clearly inspired by and excerpted from Shi'i tradition, known in those sources as Fatima's khutba, which has no place in Sunni literature generally, and thus not in the specific sources she's indicated that she's used.²²⁶ I have not come across any interviews wherein Djebbar mentions drawing on Shi'i sources, nor have I seen any analysis pointing out this fact, so the finding is striking. It raises the issue of whether further Shi'i influence should be read in Djebbar's depictions of Fatima. Clearly, hers is not a partisan project. And for the record, Djebbar's heritage is a Sunni one. Unlike medieval Shi'i writers, Djebbar is not attempting to construct the legitimacy of a sect through the voice of an outraged Fatima. However, on this issue of inheritance, the refusal of her family to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr after the Prophet's death, as well as on the topic of mourning which will be treated below, we find an image of Fatima that resonates strongly with Shi'i constructions.²²⁷ In order to fully answer the questions raised by this finding, further research into Shi'i sources will be required. Here we may say that Djebbar usurps some of the strong, activist images of Fatima found in Shi'i literature to fuel the fire for an "Islamic revolution of daughters," a cause that she references at this juncture in the novel that calls for the joining together of the women of Islam across all allegiances.²²⁸ This

²²⁶ I arrived at this conclusion by comparing the speech in *Far from Madina* and Denise Soufie's summary of the popularly transmitted version of the Shi'i literary phenomenon, Fatima's khutba. I also consulted internet translations of the khutba. Looking at Shi'i sources it outside the scope of the present study but here suggests itself as a trajectory for future research. Djebbar, 68-71; Soufie, 106 – 110; Hujjat Workshop, "Khutba of Fatima Zahra," Hujjat Workshop website, accessed May 3, 2012, http://www.hujjat-workshop.org/docs/Khutba_of_FatimaZahra.pdf.

²²⁷ Denise Soufie analyzes Sunni and Shi'i literature together on these topics in her thesis chapter on Fatima as "Activist and Martyr," 81-121.

²²⁸ Djebbar, *Far From Madina*, 68.

should be read as aimed not toward the solidification but rather the erosion of sectarian divisiveness.

Djebar goes on to present Fatima as a figure of resistance in her displays of grief. Ibn Sa'd is the only one of the Sunni chroniclers that Djebar names as a source that references Fatima's mourning. The *Tabaqat* preserves three narrations²²⁹ and three instances where poets' laments conjure an image of her mourning.²³⁰ The first report is the most direct transmission of Fatima's mourning on the occasion of her father's death. It states:

When the Apostle of Allah, may Allah bless him, died, Fatimah said: O father! You responded to your Lord when He called you. O father! The garden of paradise is your abode. O father! We invite Gabriel to mourn for you, O father! How close you have been to your Lord! He (Anas) said: When he had been buried, she said: O Anas! Were your hearts pleased when you poured earth over the body of the Apostle of Allah, may Allah bless him.²³¹

Rather than expressing a rebellious and mournful tone, this report depicts Fatima praising her father and the tone of her lament is eulogistic. The second report is earlier chronologically and states:

Verily when the time of the Prophet's death approached, Fatimah began to weep. Thereupon the Prophet, may Allah bless him, said: Do not weep O my little daughter! When I die, say: We are for Allah and to Him we will return; because every man is recompensed for every distress with this. She asked: O Apostle of Allah! Will there be a recompense for you? He replied: For me as well.²³²

In the third report, a Companion, Abu Ja'far, states, "I did not see Fatimah laughing after the Apostle of Allah, may Allah bless him, except that some time the edge of her mouth

²²⁹ Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir Vol II*, 388-389.

²³⁰ Ibid., 420, 426, 428.

²³¹ Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir Vol II*, 388.

²³² Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir Vol II*, 388-389.

widened.”²³³ Turning to the laments, a poem attributed to Safiyah Bint ‘Abd al-Muttalib states, “O Fatim (Fatimah)! moan and continue mourning in the morning till the (morning) star rises.”²³⁴ A poem attributed to Mistah Ibn Uthathah states, “It turned my fore-locks grey and bent my body, O Fatim (Fatimah)! your weeping for the dead who is lost” and “O Fatim (Fatimah)! bear patiently, there has reached your affliction to al-Tihamah and al-Najd.”²³⁵ And finally Hind bint Uthathath is attributed the following lines appealing to Fatima in grief, “O Fatim (Fatima)! my body has bent and the affliction that I suffer is violent.”²³⁶ That this poetry preserves Fatima as a figure whose mourning had a powerful effect on the community can be seen as owing at least in part to the conventions and allowances of the genre itself. However, the message of the narrations proper carries no such images of Fatima in grief. Instead she is seen dutifully eulogizing her father, being told by her father not to mourn and in the other report simply depicted as being somber, or without laughter.

Djebar characterizes Fatima’s mourning differently. Far from patient, Fatima is a fountainhead of reproaches in poetic verse. In a section that is italicized and not attributed to any source, Fatima is depicted mourning amongst gathering women, near her father’s grave, Aisha’s chamber. Fatima’s words are sometimes scathing rebuke to those who carried forward a hasty usurpation of power, and at other times poetic improvisations of her grief. In both cases, Djebar positions Fatima as the one who

²³³ Ibid., 388-389.

²³⁴ Ibid., 420.

²³⁵ Ibid., 426-427. In referring to “al-Tihamah and al-Najd” the speaker is saying something on the order of from the lands to the east to the lands to the west.

²³⁶ Ibid., 428.

refused to be silent in the face of injustice or in seeing the community moving away from her father's legacy. The novel narrates, "the beloved daughter said 'No.' 'No' to the people of Madina. 'No' repeatedly. 'No' for six long months, until this caused her death."²³⁷ Djébar also depicts Fatima confronting Abu Bakr and speaking to groups of Ansars in public spaces, the section certainly influenced by Shi'i sources. She continues her protest against disinheritance, conjuring her father and her blood relations and then restating her mistreatment. In the novel, "all weep as they anticipate the flood of reproaches in her verses" as Fatima "challenges them unsparingly."²³⁸ To Abu Bakr's widely transmitted statement "Muhammad is dead, Islam is not dead" Fatima responds, "Which Islam is not dead?"²³⁹ Djébar represents Fatima as a truth figure who witnesses injustice and is neither resigned nor silent.

MULTIVALENT RELATIONSHIPS IN THE NOVEL AND IN THE ISLAMIC PAST

The events of *Far from Madina* unfold as a foreshadowing of the tragic civil war. Djébar neither ignores nor oversimplifies the conflicts between Fatima and Aisha and Abu Bakr, central fault lines for the communal rift on the horizon.²⁴⁰ As the scenes narrated above indicate, Djébar placed disputes between Fatima and Abu Bakr at the center of the drama. However, the novel does not dwell on sectarian division. It simultaneously brings to light the intimate relatedness of these figures. Djébar

²³⁷ Djébar, *Far From Madina*, 53-56

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, xv.

humanizes Abu Bakr whom she portrays as deeply disturbed by Fatima's rage. In the novel he sheds many tears and expresses regret for the inheritance debacle.²⁴¹ Even more importantly, Djebbar explores how relationships amongst women add complexity to the web of alliances and dynamics of conflict threaded through the community.

Djebbar presents the figure of Asma bint Umayy as a critical link between Fatima and Abu Bakr and as a character who embraced them both even at the height of the conflicts between them. The novel suggests a close friendship between Asma and Fatima. After all, the historical Asma was married to Ja'far ibn Abi Talib, the brother of Fatima's own husband Ali.²⁴² After Ja'far's death at the Battle of Muta', Asma would remarry Abu Bakr, and Djebbar characterizes her as his favorite wife. Djebbar further foregrounds Fatima and Abu Bakr's characters' intimate relations with Asma, which she posits as a link between one another, through their deaths. Al-Tabari preserves a report that Asma washed Fatima's corpse.²⁴³ It is also reported that Asma fulfilled Fatima's wishes and did not let Aisha or other non-family members visit her corpse.²⁴⁴ Asma was married to Abu Bakr at the time of Fatima's death and illness. During these days Djebbar places Asma at Fatima's bedside and depicts Abu Bakr seeking Asma in her empty

²⁴¹ In depicting Abu Bakr in this manner one of Djebbar's sources is likely one of al-Tabari's report, not from the inheritance ordeal but from the matter of succession. In this report Abu Bakr regretted the events that took place at Fatima's house on the eve of his ascendance to the role of caliph. Al-Tabari records three things he wishes he "had left aside," and among them, "I wish I had not thrown open the house of Fatima." Abu Jafar Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *The Challenge to the Empires*, Vol. 11, trans. Khalid Yahya Blankinship (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 149.

²⁴² L. Veccia Vaglieri, "Djafar b. Abi Talib." *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs, Brill, 2011. Brill Online.

²⁴³ For the narration al-Tabari preserved that Asma washed Fatima's corpse, al-Tabari, *Volume 10*, 39. Both al-Tabari and Ibn Sa'd preserve narrations that Asma made a bier for Fatima's corpse, al-Tabari, *Volume 39*, 167-169 and Ibn Sa'd, *The Women of Madina*, 20.

²⁴⁴ The EI2 entry on Fatima mentions this incident citing al-Tabari, Vaglieri, "Fatima."

quarters.²⁴⁵ When it is all over, and Fatima is gone and Asma returns home, even after the incident with Aisha, there is no dispute between the husband and wife. For Djebbar, Asma's loyalty toward Fatima does not conflict with her love for her husband. Asma's perspective embraces both characters, an important message conveyed in the book. Further, Djebbar suggests that Abu Bakr's later insistence that the same hands that washed Fatima's corpse also wash his is significant.²⁴⁶

On leaving this earth, the caliph wishes to be linked to his dearest friend, Muhammad, through two women: Muhammad breathed his last in the arms of Aisha, Abu Bakr's beloved daughter, and now the caliph will be washed by Asma, who washed the other favorite daughter, Fatima. Death came for the former in the arms of the wife – the friend's daughter – whilst Abu Bakr's body will be washed by the wife, herself no doubt the favorite, but also the friend of the daughter of the friend.²⁴⁷

Djebbar posits this linking as a “double, triple female intercession.” That Asma would, after Abu Bakr's death, marry Ali ibn Abi Talib, further exemplifies the multiple nature of loyalties and the complexity of relationships in the first community defying simple sectarian divisions.²⁴⁸

Djebbar's consideration of Fatima and Aisha's relationship also goes beyond a simple sectarian opposition. Though Djebbar contrasts the two figures, reports conflicts between them and even suggests that they are the two poles of “feminine presence,” she

²⁴⁵ Djebbar, *Far From Madina*, 205- 209.

²⁴⁶ Halevi discusses the fact that Asma washed Abu Bakr's corpse and that the first caliph commanded publicly that it be so. Halevi cites Malik's *Muwatta* KJ no. 593. Leor Halevi *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 54, 62, 271 n30.

²⁴⁷ Djebbar, *Far From Madina*, 187.

²⁴⁸ This marriage is also seen by Djebbar to be Asma's act of solidarity to her dear friend Fatima. Djebbar paints a scene of the two women together, late in Fatima's illness, reminiscing about Fatima's mother and sisters who have long since passed away, who were also close to Asma. She knew them because she was one of the earliest converts to Islam. In this scene Fatima asks, knowing she is near death, “And what of my daughters, Asma?” To this Asma replies, “Zainab and Umm Kulthum are my daughters too you know!” Ibid., 206-207.

holds that there is a link between them that persists and transcends their differences.²⁴⁹ During the time period recorded in the novel Aisha is young and not yet fully the influential woman she would later become. In the novel she is observing the events she will later transmit. While in the book her narrations fall on the ears of children, in the future she would become a voice of authority for the community. Djebbar closes the book with a vision of Aisha as the first *rawiya*, or the first of the female narrators of tradition, a subject that will receive further treatment in the next chapter. The text hints at the fact that Aisha would later rebel and take up a political role. Djebbar envisions a future where Aisha is united with Fatima, both in the common cause of speaking for Muslim women, and in rebelling against male authority. The epilogue inquires, “What if Aisha’s soft voice, the unending flow of her narration, should merge with Fatima’s eloquence in spate, the turbulence of her defiance?”²⁵⁰ Since Aisha’s rebellion would be mounted against Fatima’s husband, Djebbar is again pointing to the multiple alliances and loyalties that characterize women’s position in society. By uniting Fatima and Aisha, Djebbar asserts a vision that clearly transcends the polarity of sectarian division or a reduction of conflicts to personal feuds. Instead, the novel constructs a gaze that embraces all these early Islamic figures and an Islamic community in its fractured complexity.

Far from Madina’s reconstruction of the voices and experiences of women who appeared in the shadows of early Islamic historical works is not simply a project that adds color and shade to those canonical accounts. The narrative visits women’s spaces and

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 273.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 275.

suggests modes of female empowerment that challenge chroniclers' constructions of marginal, passive women. Taking as a starting point the traces left by classical historiographers, Djébar places Fatima at the center of a narrative that considers the changing situation of women after the death of the Prophet. She imagines Fatima as a woman who challenged a form of authority that was in the process of becoming rigid, hinting at a wider trend of marginalization of women's social position to come. For Djébar, Fatima's interests were complex and multiple. Rather than simply being concerned with the right of her family to succession, Fatima challenged authority for the sake of her father's vision and out of a sense of justice for the wider collective of women. This perspective raises conflicts from a personal level to a public or even political level. Further, the novel's exploration of relationships amongst women adds complexity to the web of alliances and dynamics of conflict that developed in the community over time suggesting a vision of fractured yet inclusive Islamic identity. Djébar's novel utilizes traditional elements of Islamic historiography and maintains the framework of early Islamic narrative in a manner that suggests hers is a legitimate consideration that the canon must contend with. By interpolating strong female voices into this literary field, *Far from Madina* challenges the limits of this canon and destabilizes gender hierarchy encoded in it.

Chapter III: *Far from Madina*, a narration of female Muslim identity through the principle of difference

In addition to further explicating how Assia Djébar's novel *Far From Madina* contests and destabilizes constructions of gender identity in Islamic discourse, this chapter will consider the alternative construction of female Muslim identity suggested by the novel and its significance for the broader question of communal identity. I will approach this inquiry by treating the text as Djébar's own personal narrative performance of contemporary Muslim identity. I will examine the reflexive nature of the work, highlighting those features that can be considered autobiographical and probing how the act of writing it constructs Djébar as a Muslim woman. I will argue that the reflexive aspect of the work derives in part from the relationships that Djébar constructs between herself and the historical women she evokes through the process of writing, focusing specifically on links to Aisha bint Abi Bakr. Next, I will explore the relationship of Djébar's narrative strategies to the specific hermeneutical approach that is at the heart of the novel and that pervades most of Djébar's work, namely that meaning and identity are always contested, multiple, becoming. Further, I will explore some of the consequences of reading the writing of this novel as the performance of female Muslim identity and consider how Djébar's authorial voice and hermeneutical approach transcend oppositional strategies to formulate and manifest Muslim identity through narration and the principle of difference.

MUSLIM COMMUNAL IDENTITY

Communal identity is a dynamic phenomenon, continuously constructed by generations through collective action and through the narration of actions and events, past and present. At its origins, Sunni Muslim communal identity was primarily a matter of works such as the public disclosure of allegiance and faith, attendance of communal prayers and historical acts of solidarity such as the migration from Mecca to Madina or fighting in the Muslim conquests. The Qur'an itself does not clearly delineate the five pillars of Muslim practice that have for centuries been adopted as the cornerstone of communal belonging. The Qur'an required further explication and the details of Muslim responsibilities were sought in the example of the Prophet himself. The concept of the Sunna refers to this relationship, "the Prophet's embodiment of the Qur'anic message."²⁵¹ During the first few generations of Islam, the Sunna was attested to by Companions who had witnessed the Prophet's actions and statements. This body of knowledge is thought by modern scholars to have circulated amongst the first few generations of the Muslim community primarily in an oral medium. According to one scholar:

During the formative period of Islamic thought, the oral nature of transmission and authentication of knowledge, as well as oral-based interpretative strategies of the primary sources, were considered more authentic and were more prevalent than [*sic*] written-based ones.²⁵²

However, as the Islamic empire expanded and the community was embroiled in political turmoil, the need to stabilize this tradition in written form became an increasingly favored

²⁵¹ Duderija, 390.

²⁵² Ibid., 393.

position. And thus, over the course of the first two hundred years of the religion the obligations of the faith were gradually inscribed in written hadith reports which facilitated the formation of Muslim identity and proper Muslim conduct into a normative orthodoxy. With this development, a shift in interpretative approach toward narrations of the events surrounding the arrival of the religion and the life of the Prophet can be observed. Whereas the portion of the Sunna that did not directly address the proper performance of ritual practice had previously been viewed as providing “general ethico-religious principles,” examples provided in the hadith literature began to be seen as providing “literal all-comprehensive meaning.”²⁵³ According to Adis Duderija:

In other words, the largely ‘*amal*-based, ethico-religious or value-objective-based and non-written-dependent concept of Sunna that existed at the time of the first three generations of Muslims now became increasingly viewed as being qualitatively and quantitatively identical to [(a) *sic*] specific, edified and static view of the Sunna as reflected in proliferating Hadith.²⁵⁴

This resulting body of literature was subject to interpretive regimes and invested with degrees of authority most clearly demonstrated in the rise and development of the legal schools.

In the Sunni case, over the course of the medieval period, an exegetical tradition, hadith canon and *madhhabs*, or schools of law developed, and were structured to serve as the definitive source of direction for proper Muslim behavior and the proper ordering of Muslim society. Owing in part to the lack of a central clerical authority, textual tradition has continued to play a pivotal role in the functioning of Islamic institutions and in

²⁵³ Ibid., 401.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 412.

shaping Islamic discourse on identity. This scholarly effort to forge orthodoxy occurred against the backdrop of a sprawling, geographically and culturally diverse Muslim population characterized by a corresponding plurality of belief and practice in tension with normative formulations. Scholars sought to stabilize Islamic doctrine and practice by establishing authoritative discursive institutions. On the one hand, this effort has been inclusive, preserving the voices of prominent early female Companions, a plurality of interpretative views, as well as mechanisms for transformation. On the other hand, regardless of this multiple character, the discursive elaboration of Islamic religious understanding and law has until the modern period been largely a closed process conducted by scholarly circles of men. These intermediaries have viewed the Qur'an and reports about the Prophet through an interpretive layer set down by the earliest medieval commentators and authorities.

A variety of historical studies have taken up the analysis of the manner in which medieval Islamic textual authority has interpreted scripture and tradition in relation to women.²⁵⁵ Aisha Geissinger's work analyzes medieval interpretive precedent, demonstrating clearly that it entails a discourse that on the one hand is "exclusionary" and "brands women in general as intellectually deficient and unfit to exercise authority," and on the other, ascribes to men "divinely-bestowed authority and rationality." Deployed regularly in these early interpretive traditions, this ideology inscribed a

²⁵⁵ Another important work to be considered in this category, which I touched on in the introduction, is Fatima Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite*.

“gendered social hierarchy” upon the paradigm of ideal Muslim society.²⁵⁶ This discursive construction has had the real historical effect of marginalizing women’s participation in a variety of social areas including scholarly domains as well as limiting her legal status. Geissinger’s study proceeds from this level of analysis to investigate conflicting currents of influence and social realities that played a role in constructing textual authority and communal identity, complicating the picture, and foregrounding a record of female agency. Geissinger points to the fact that there were female authorities preserved in textual tradition, despite the apparent ideological bias against them held by later interpreters, whose transmissions and opinions underlie the Sunni tradition. Numerous respected Muslim women did in fact transmit hadith that were considered authoritative enough to be canonized as sound traditions. Among the most important of this group was the Prophet’s youngest wife, Aisha bint Abi Bakr. Not only did she contribute substantially to communal memory and legal precedent by way of reports, she also was a prominent participant in interpretative debates.²⁵⁷

The discourse around ideal female Muslim identity within Islamic textual tradition is most clearly demonstrated in the commentary on the most revered women of the first community. Denise Spellberg’s work on Aisha bint Abi Bakr investigates historical narrative as a site for the construction of communal identity.²⁵⁸ Her study focuses on the manner in which medieval scholars elaborated the narratives of prominent early Muslims in light of their political and sectarian concerns. In the case of important

²⁵⁶ Geissinger, ii-iii and 151-155 and 167.

²⁵⁷ See Aisha Geissinger, “The Exegetical Traditions of Aisha: Notes on their Impact and Significance.” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 6:1 (2004): 1-20.

²⁵⁸ Spellberg, 6-11.

female figures, Spellberg finds that this process is also the site for the construction of gender identity. Her study examines how underlying discursive currents shaped the selection of the exemplary women of Islam. Aisha's legacy was of central importance to Sunni's, serving as both a practical point of example for its women in areas of "Islamic law and ritual practice," and as a key source of Sunni tradition upon whom the legitimacy of the sect rested.²⁵⁹ Conversely for the Shi'i community, Aisha served as an oppositional paradigm of identity because of her role in opposing the caliphate of Ali ibn Abi Talib and because her relationship to Abu Bakr, the first caliph whom they viewed as having usurped Ali ibn Abi Talib's rightful inheritance. According to Spellberg, the episodes of Aisha's life became opportunities for medieval interpreters of vying communities to articulate their competing narratives.²⁶⁰ One of the most important episodes engaged by these commentators was the accusation of adultery against Aisha, an allegation from which she was exonerated in Sunni narratives only.²⁶¹

A key phenomenon that Spellberg explores is how medieval scholars "fleshed out Qur'anic female ideals" by elaborating linkages between the most revered Muslim women, namely Khadija, Fatima and Aisha, and the praiseworthy women named in the Qur'an, most important among them, Maryam.²⁶² She traces how in both Shi'i and Sunni literature, Khadija and Fatima were elevated above Aisha, stating that in "selecting and promoting Khadija and Fatima over and above Aisha, Sunni Muslim theologians

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 8-9

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 15-16.

²⁶¹ See: Denise A. Spellberg, "'Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001-2006), 56-58.

²⁶² Ibid., 153.

confirmed a unified Islamic vision of an idealized feminine gender.”²⁶³ According to Spellberg’s argument, medieval commentators gravitated toward elaborating laudatory discourse around those female figures whose stories fit their contemporary model of proper female conduct. Spellberg finds that, “Purity and maternity would prevail as preeminent ideal categories for the feminine in Qur’anic exegesis.” Aisha’s controversial biography and degree of influence exceeded that paradigm. These factors added up to render Aisha as an unfitting figure for the inscription of ideal Muslim womanhood. This logic of discursive construction also speaks to why textual authority opted not to treat Aisha and other early women who participated in the transmission and interpretation of tradition as precedents and likewise did not embrace women as participants in the Islamic scholarship.

Owing to this discourse produced by early Islamic scholars as well as a range of social, historical and economic factors that extend beyond women’s status as constructed in Sunni textual authority, Muslim women were essentially excluded from participating in scholarly and legal domains of interpretation. Likewise, women’s voices were rarely recorded contributing to the discourse on Muslim identity until the modern era when they have begun to challenge interpretations in a variety of settings.²⁶⁴ Beginning as early as the late nineteenth century, Muslim women have begun engaging with Islamic textual

²⁶³ Ibid., 178.

²⁶⁴ This is not to say that women were wholly excluded from Islamic intellectual and scholarly religious life. Women did continue to transmit hadith and engage in scholarly endeavors, and participated in legal culture. See for example: Jonathan Berkey, “Women and Islamic Education in the Mamluk Period,” in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting boundaries in Sex and Gender*, eds. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 143-155; Asma Sayeed, “Women and Hadith Transmission Two Case Studies from Mamluk Damascus,” *Studia Islamica* 95 (2002): 71-94; Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: from Ibn Sa’d to Who’s Who*.

tradition and a central issue has been reckoning with the discourse on women. Among the important questions raised by such scholarship is the issue of how female voices were treated by male scholars and to what degree women's historical statements and contributions were marginalized in their works. Another important discussion revolves around the evaluation of the social and symbolic roles assigned to Muslim women by classical Islamic discourse, especially for those concerned with critiquing post/colonial discourses on Muslim communal identity. Undertaken in the literary domain, Assia Djebar's endeavor in *Far from Madina* is a contribution to this wave of female participation in the narration of Islamic history, actively contesting and constructing communal identity.

FEMALE MUSLIM IDENTITY IN *FAR FROM MADINA*

Djebar's return to the voices of the women of the first community of Islam attempts to show that the first generation of Muslim society afforded larger roles and social space for women than the evolving formulation of Islamic orthodoxy would ascribe to them. Further, the work suggests that an alternative universe of Muslim society could just as easily have evolved and that the current status is not divinely legitimated. Instead, Djebar points to the theme that is prominent throughout her larger body of her work, that those with the power of the pen have the means to shape values, meaning and identity. For Djebar, challenging historical constructions of female Muslim identity is not merely oppositional. Instead, there is a strong sense that meaning is always contested and that identity is fractured, multiple and unfolding. This conviction

in Djébar's work derives from her poetic, experiential, and existential realities such as the experiences of war, exile and the female subject position.²⁶⁵ From this perspective, attacking great edifices of history or undermining narratives that have attempted to fix Muslim women is not tantamount to an attack on Islam itself. Djébar does not ascribe to a fixed, objectified view of Islam. Her critique is rather focused upon the hands of those who have attempted to control the meaning and authority of Islam. In this aspect, Djébar's work could be said to be advancing the question so expertly probed by Judith Butler:

To what extent is 'identity' a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? And how do the regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity?²⁶⁶

For Djébar, fixed identity is not possible. Thus, her retelling of the Islamic past employs a creative and sometimes improvisational mode of narration that utilizes fictionalization and variation in order to seek the "living truth" of past events, and to foreground the constructed nature of fixed accounts of the past and paradigms of identity resting upon them.

Despite the political and ideological discourses that have constructed formulations of ideal Muslim woman and that have regulated Muslim women's possibilities for participation in areas of Islamic society, this reality does not represent a necessary or unchangeable truth. For both Djébar and Butler, the subject is neither fixed nor unified, and all indications otherwise are discursive constructions. Butler instead declares

²⁶⁵ This positionality is discussed at greater length in chapter one.

²⁶⁶ Butler, 23.

unequivocally that the subject is necessarily a continuous construction that cannot be fixed. This view opens up the possibility for the ongoing negotiation of identity, even against the backdrop of powerful normative proscriptions. In regards to the category “woman” Butler states:

The assumption of its essential incompleteness permits that category to serve as a permanently available site of contested meanings. The definitional incompleteness of the category might then serve as a normative ideal relieved of coercive forces.

Adopting this paradigm, Butler describes a new concept of gender identity wherein, “Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time.” And if one commits to this approach as an ethic, “it [gender] will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure.”²⁶⁷ In this paradigm, one ceases to put forward a singular notion of identity, but rather proliferates various performances of identity which undermine the coherence and strength of orthodox categories and definitions.²⁶⁸ Returning to Butler’s question as to whether formulations of gender identity specifically and cultural categories of identity more broadly are accurately assessed as either normative or descriptive, we see that Djebbar is interested in carrying this productive question to the task of destabilizing not just the fixed character of female Muslim identity, but communal identity generally. The construction of early Muslim women in *Far from Madina* creates slippages and undermines the authority of dominant constructions of memory and meaning without positing an alternate fixed

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 7, 21-22

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 189.

construction. Djebbar's project is to embrace the act of narration and the construction of communal identity in a way that transcends oppositional definitions or efforts to enforce paradigms of normativity. Not only does Djebbar seize the right to reinterpret the Islamic past, she suggests that it is through this practice of narrating and relating to the past that identity is performed. *Far from Madina* suggests a model that is fundamentally inclusive of all performances of Muslim identity wherein otherness is not simply an adversarial relationship or a mode of alienation, but is rather a truthful way of experiencing the self. Embracing the notion that incompleteness is a defining feature of Muslim identity opens the category up to continuous contestation and negotiation so that it becomes a site for the articulation of identity through difference rather than normative proscription.

The theoretical perspectives of Trinh T. Minh-ha, a Vietnamese feminist, filmmaker and scholar, are useful to the project of explicating how Assia Djebbar, through her novel *Far from Madina*, narrates and thus performs female Muslim identity through the principle of difference. Minh-ha offers a language with which we can engage the subversive mode of narration of communal identity presented and performed by Djebbar in the text. Further, Minh-ha's ideas elucidate why *Far From Madina* must be considered reflexive and shed light on the nature of Djebbar's relationship to the women whose stories she narrates as well as the Muslim community more widely. Finally, deploying these concepts from Minh-ha's work will assist us in discussing forms of subjectivity and identity that are not fixed or final that we encounter in Djebbar's narrations.

In her work, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Minh-ha's project is to discover a way to represent and write about identity in a manner

that is plural and inclusive and resists “regimes of truth.”²⁶⁹ Thus, she sets out to identify and disarm the mechanisms of discourse that set up positions of mastery from which to name and interpret their objects of study. She states:

The other is never to be known unless one arrives at a suspension of language, where the reign of codes yields to a state of constant non-knowledge...unless one understands the necessity of a practice of language which remains, through its signifying operations, a process constantly unsettling the identity of meaning and speaking/writing subject.²⁷⁰

This critique must play out within her writing, and Minh-ha is vigilant not to adopt a voice or position whose rigidity would reinforce hegemonic structures. Representation must not attempt to fix identities or facts. Thus, Minh-ha crafts her narrative from disruptive reflections on the conventions of identity, subjectivity and knowledge, forcing her readers to confront these topics from shifting perspectives of alterity. What is more, in order to subvert the othering tendencies of discourse, Minh-ha asserts that the false distinction between the writer and text must be abandoned and reliance on the fiction of authoritative, unified subjectivity dispensed with. The writer must be interwoven with the subjects of her study. It is only after this context has been established that Minh-ha takes up her own story-telling endeavor. When the disruptions have sufficiently accumulated in the text, she narrates. In a fully embodied endeavor she evokes voices from African, Asian and Native American storytelling traditions, circulating these stories and allowing them to mingle with the master narrative without becoming its object.

²⁶⁹ Minh-ha, 121.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 76.

AUTHORIAL REFLEXIVITY

In *Far from Madina*, Djebbar focuses on the days after the death of Muhammad when the Muslim community was left to interpret for itself the scripture that was now complete and to collectively recall the words and deeds of the Prophet in order to guide their communal endeavor. Djebbar constructs the drama of the novel around the question of what role early Muslim women would play in this process of remembering, and thus the construction of communal identity. The novel addresses early Muslim women's agency on multiple levels, focusing not only upon the barriers that women faced in pursuing full participation in their society, but also the obstacles they had to overcome in order to contribute to the communal process of narrating its history. This question is raised repeatedly in the text as archival traces place early Muslim women at the scene of events that will become matters of debate. The voice of the narrator asks, will this woman transmit her account? These issues link the women of the text to Djebbar, who in writing the novel, has embraced her role as witness and transmitter of the stories of these early women. At stake is not simply whether or not alternative accounts of events will be added to the record in order to contest specific constructions of discourse. The most important question for Djebbar is whether narrators will also accept the duty of preserving the "living word," a modality of remembrance that preserves the stories and precedents of the past in a way that is not fixed or final.²⁷¹ In Djebbar's novel, the women of Madina felt themselves moving away from the light, the source of guidance embodied by

²⁷¹ Assia Djebbar, *Far From Madina*, xv; Zimra, "When the Past Answers Our Present," 266.

Muhammad's continuous reception of direction and scripture from Allah. From this perspective, Muhammad's prophethood is seen as a raw experience wherein he channeled a truth that was neither rational nor final. The Qur'an that Muhammad transmitted exceeded human reason and continuously unfolded during his life time, revising and superceding itself. Djébar's narrative is aligned with these qualities and a conception of Islam viewed through them. As she narrates these women's experiences she abandons conventions of strictly fact-based reports and offers no final interpretations. Rather, she attempts to narrate the past in a way that will make her foremothers "live again." Djébar is drawn back to these early days of Islam because she too felt her own society moving far away from the light that a "living" Islam has to offer and its potential to transform from the rigid and narrow orthodoxy now standing in its place.

Much of Djébar's work since the 1990's has included overtly autobiographical elements, but tracing the self-referential nature of *Far from Madina* is a less straight forward task. The first person referential, "I" belonging to Djébar appears only in the forward to this novel. In comparison, in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, Djébar brings together an interrogation of colonial chroniclers' accounts of the occupation of Algeria, the oral testimony of Amazigh women who participated in the revolution, and remembrances from her own childhood in Algeria and experience of exile during the war. Djébar wrote *Fantasia* having returned to writing after a long hiatus during which she made two films that greatly influenced her work thereafter. The filmmaking process pointed Djébar in the direction of solving the problem of finding "a way to move back and forth between the past and the present....and to navigate between the world of men

and the world of women.” Through the experience of working on *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*, a meditative feature that weaves together the testimonies of women of her own tribe, Djébar felt her own link to communal memory rekindled as the women narrated their stories to her and she witnessed “that the chain of solidarity was gradually reforming.” Reflecting on the film, Djébar says:

I thought of the interwoven polyphony of all the women’s voices...they formed a chorus—a choir into which I wanted to plunge myself, but without completely dissolving, losing my own sense of self...At that precise moment I discovered how to write my quartet: I had to reenter my own autobiography.²⁷²

The “chain of solidarity” that Djébar speaks to in the above referenced interview is also evoked in the pages of *Far from Madina*. This expression points to the responsibility that Djébar sees women collectively tasked with, to carry forward narratives so often silenced. The women of Mount Chenoua did not write, much like the women of Madina, and thus could not ensure that their stories would be inscribed in the annals of history. Beyond this, their narrations make no attempt to suggest themselves as official or final, and at times do not even claim bases in authentic historical origin. Their narrations piece together a collective memory of the past through a polyphonic chorus. These modes of reporting run counter to the norms of discourse and the formulation of “proper” historical narratives, which further alienates the voices of these women from representation in official discourse on collective memory. In *Far from Madina*, Djébar assumes the role of narrator of the memory of early Muslim women’s experiences. In facing the dilemmas of silence in the historical script and representing subjects resistant to fixed representation,

²⁷² Ibid., 124-125.

Djebar was forced to rely on “fiction,” her own creativity, in the act of “filling in the gaps in collective memory.” In so doing, Djebar inserts her own voice among those first women of Islam. She is forced to rely on a strategy of reflexivity, in order to, as she puts it, “recreate those times in which I wished to dwell, and to try to put those distant days into their context.”²⁷³

Trinh T. Minh-ha offers an analysis of the relationship of the writer, her subject, and history that lends further insight into Djebar’s embrace of reflexive writing. Minh-ha unfolds the problematic issue, that language is coded with binary oppositions and power relations, and that the writer, or “holder of speech,” typically “writes from a position of power, creating as an ‘author,’ situating herself *above* her work and existing *before* it, rarely simultaneously *with* it.”²⁷⁴ The engaged writer whose objective is to destabilize dominant power relations and assert writing as an act of solidarity with the “other” must reflect upon the conventions of traditional narrative and the sovereignty of the author. Minh-ha asserts that such a consideration leads to the breakdown of the distinction between the writer and her work. She states, “...I-the-writer do not *express* (a) reality more than (a) reality *impresses* itself on me. Expresses me.”²⁷⁵ It is by acknowledging this reflexivity and divesting one’s words of any special quality of “authority” or “authenticity” that the writer arrives at the possibility of “expression or communication...which does not translate a reality outside itself but, more precisely,

²⁷³ Djebar, *Far From Madina*, xv.

²⁷⁴ The emphasis belongs to Minh-ha as do all italicizations appearing in text quoted from her work here. Minh-ha, 6.

²⁷⁵ Minh-ha, 18

allows the emergence of a new reality.”²⁷⁶ In what follows, we will attempt to elucidate how Djébar’s *Far from Madina* simultaneously constructs the author and recasts the early Islamic past.

While *Far from Madina* does not utilize autobiographical details of Djébar’s life, it is possible to draw parallels between the experiences and conditions of the characters of *Far from Madina* and Djébar’s own life, particularly in regards to her roles as a storyteller and scribe. In order to trace these connections, it is necessary to draw on self-narrations presented in Djébar’s other works. In the autobiographical writings she weaves into *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, Djébar reflects on how she has experienced prohibitions against female visibility and women’s voices, written and oral, in the context of Algerian culture. She opens *Fantasia* reflecting on the contradictions surrounding her opportunity to go to school and to learn to read and write in a culture where women were called upon to veil not only their bodies, but also their voices. This attitude also circulated among women and Djébar recalls the contempt and condemnation that women of her own family would hold against ‘the woman who raises her voice.’”²⁷⁷ Writing represented further danger, not quieting the voice, but rather, presenting it with the means to “take flight” and “circulate.”²⁷⁸ Djébar, like the women in *Far from Madina*, had to resist social pressure to be silent and find the courage with which to narrate. Their efforts are linked further as the duty has fallen to Djébar to bring back to

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 21-22

²⁷⁷ Assia Djébar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, 203.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 3.

life the stories of those women who found the courage to speak but were rendered silent or muted by male chroniclers and interlocutors of Islamic authority.

THE NARRATORS OF MADINA

In the historical timeframe of *Far from Madina*, situated primarily in the days following the Prophet's death, women who spoke up, who narrated, were not commonplace. Djébar, in exploring this tradition of narration, provides a variety of depictions of vocal women. In so doing, she includes women who were not members of the Muslim community but who were remarkable in their oratorical skills and unconventional social positions. She narrates the story of Sajah, a self-proclaimed prophetess who emerged during the Ridda or apostasy wars after the death of Muhammad, a woman whose strength lay in her "poetic inspiration" and "ability to use language like music."²⁷⁹ Djébar at once explores the agency and ingenuity of "other" women such as Sajah, and explores how they faced specifically gendered expectations that figured into their demise. For Sajah, the allegiance of her army foundered when she accepted a marriage proposal from and entered into an extended liaison with a rival rogue prophet, Musaylima, without accepting a dowry. Djébar foregrounds the way history would downplay the eloquence and significance of such women. She cites how chronicler al-Tabari presents the logic of the army's desertion, "they felt ashamed at having been led so far for an amorous encounter!"²⁸⁰ The double standard is clear. The

²⁷⁹ Djébar, *Far from Madina*, 33-34.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

wars of the times routinely resulted in the reaping of spoils, which typically consisted of women and wives. Such exploits, or in this case, a political marriage alliance accompanied by its rewards, when carried out by a woman, undermined her legitimacy and detracted from her legacy. It became Djébar's role to retell the ending of Sajah's tale from the viewpoint of her agency and empowerment.

Another central figure that Djébar represents as an exemplary narrator is Fatima bint Muhammad. Djébar highlights her role as the quintessential rebel who spoke a version of truth in the public arena that was in direct opposition to Islamic authority.²⁸¹ However, Fatima was certainly not the norm. As the daughter of the Prophet, she was afforded special dispensation from the caliph, Abu Bakr. She was protected from reprisal and in the days following her father's death, also perhaps felt that she had nothing to lose. Thus, Fatima had an exceptional position from which to speak. Despite her vocalizations, Fatima did not become a prolific narrator in Sunni tradition.²⁸² On one hand she did not live long enough to transmit her truth widely, and on the other, Sunni chroniclers chose not to include many of the controversial features of her biography in their accounts. While scribes and narrators of the Shi'i tradition would widely adopt Fatima as a figure through whom they could articulate expressly sectarian narrations, Djébar's text points to a different narrative effort. The story Djébar is highlighting in Fatima's rebellion is not just about the rights of her family, but the rights of Muslim women in general. The narration of this tale is something that other women would have

²⁸¹ See chapter two for my detailed analysis of Fatima's rebellion in Djébar's text.

²⁸² According to Denise Soufie, some fifteen or sixteen reports are attributed to Fatima in Sunni tradition, Soufie, 69.

to take up, and Djebbar saw that she was one of those to whom that role had fallen. Djebbar's treatment of Fatima also foregrounds the fact that the daughter was not a scribe and did not possess the power of the pen.²⁸³ This observation points to the gendered division of the domains of writing and speaking as well the failure that Fatima's gender represented for the continuance of Muhammad's prophetic lineage. If Fatima had been a son, she could have written down his wishes for succession as he lay on his deathbed. If she had been a son, she would have been recognized as his rightful heir. Djebbar imagines Fatima's reserved regret at this fact, which again recasts the idea of being dispossessed of the right to succession from a strictly familial consideration to a gendered one.

The most common modes in which women took up narration in *Far from Madina* were by transmitting to children in the domestic domain, in the private confidence of another woman, or in a ritualized gathering of women. It is to the women of this group that Djebbar assigns the name *rawiya*, or narrator, a term typically associated in classical Islamic scholarship to the source of a hadith report. One of the vignettes that Djebbar depicts takes up the example of Umm Sulaym bint Milhan,²⁸⁴ who despite having witnessed the Prophet narrate an important dream in her home, did not have "*the necessary courage to set herself up as a transmitter*" [italics original].²⁸⁵ Instead, she

²⁸³ Djebbar, *Far from Madina*, 47-48.

²⁸⁴ Djebbar's English translator transliterates this woman's name as Umm Salem which is highly unusual. The traditional transliteration is Umm Sulaym. Reading Umm Sulaym's capsule in Ibn Sa'd biographical dictionary it is clear that she was very close to the Prophet and his wives. She was present at battles, she prepared wives for Muhammad for betrothal, Muhammad visited her regularly. In one hadith preserved in canonical collections as well as in the Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqat*, her son Anas transmits that he heard the Prophet say, "I entered the Garden and heard a rustle before me and there was al-Ghumaysa' bint Milhan." Ghumaysa is another name attributed to Umm Sulaym. Ibn Sa'd, *The Women of Madina*, 277-283.

²⁸⁵ Djebbar, *Far from Madina*, 161. Italics throughout quoted sections are Djebbar's.

expects that the Prophet's vision of paradise would be best transmitted by her young son, Anas ibn Malik, who was also present. Djebbar describes the pregnant experience of such witness and how it conflicted with a respectable Companion such as Umm Sulaym's sense of her proper role. She is depicted ruminating:

'So is there incompatibility?,' I thought, 'between feeling oneself a rawiya and remaining a mother, the passionate mother of a son like Anas ibn al-Malik, who, despite his youth, is so respected a faqih?...And she, Umm Sulaym?' [italics original]²⁸⁶

Djebbar also presents more intimate episodes concerning Umm Sulaym that are also collected in classical biographical sources and hadith literature.²⁸⁷ One poignant story is taken from the night her young son Abu Umayr died after an illness. Umm Sulaym perfumed herself and had intercourse with her husband, Abu Talha, before relaying to him the heartening news. Her act had been in the faith that she and her husband would be rewarded with another child. The Prophet, on hearing this from Abu Talha, prayed that they would indeed be blessed with another child. In *Far from Madina*, Umm Sulaym and her sister Umm Harem, follow through with their desire to recollect and retell. They narrate to one another this story and the story of Umm Sulaym's pregnancy which followed, as well as many other moments of personal and communal importance which they had experienced and were drawn to reflect upon in making sense of their own lives. Umm Harem too senses the communal significance of her experiences but doubts her authority to recount publicly that which she has seen. She says:

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 161.

²⁸⁷ The following story appears in both the sahih collections of Muslim and Bukhari.

*I speak, but have I the right to report, even if only to my sister, what is being said in the streets of Madina? May a rawiya feel she has sufficient authority to transmit among men what her eyes have seen, what her ears have heard? Or, in order to do that, must she become a wayfarer, a beggar, above all, a childless woman, without sons who bring her honour, the opposite of Umm Sulaym and myself, who seldom leave our homes in Madina? [italics original]*²⁸⁸

We find in the historical sources and in the hadith literature that it is indeed Anas ibn Malik, Umm Sulaym's son, who would transmit even her most intimate stories and that she herself either remained silent, or was rendered thus by the scribes that came after. Indeed Anas ibn Malik would become a prolific transmitter of hadith and was famously the last of the Companions of the Prophet to pass away. Umm Harem was credited with transmitting one report, of a different dream that the Prophet had in her home. However, she was not credited with transmitting the many other important events that she had witnessed or heard her sister report.

Djebar also presents a ritualized context of convening women as a vehicle for a communal process of narration. The rawiya in this context is the woman who gives herself fully to the spiritual, oracular activity of storytelling which echoes the experience of the prophets. This rawiya bears witness, improvising and weaving fragments of memory into a whole, as one Medinese woman put it, to "preserve for posterity that passionate eloquence which inflamed us."²⁸⁹ The rawiya opens herself to primal voices and listens, in a manner that we might liken to the way that the rishis of ancient India listened and heard their holy scriptures, the Vedas, vibrating in the cosmos. Djebar is drawing upon a model of storytelling which she has observed among the Amazigh

²⁸⁸ Djebar, *Far from Madina*, 162.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

women of her own tribe. In the film *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*, Djébar visually represents, and in *Fantasia* she describes in prose, “women whispering” in the dark of their rooms or in fire-lit caves “Retaining their role of story-teller, figurehead at the prow of memory.”²⁹⁰ Through these renderings, Djébar tries to imagine how the stories she hears were passed down, tries to describe the transformation she has witnessed before a woman who delves into a deep collective cord of memory and “sets her voice free...sets herself free,” remembering and retelling and thereby transmitting “torch-words” for a wider community of women.²⁹¹

In *Far from Madina*, it is the rawiya who will “*continue the chain*,” [italics original] speaking for women who would remain silent, and opening a communal context wherein their desire to be heard and their desire to remember could play out.²⁹² Such a rawiya, however, is often marginal, and her narrations would not have purchase in the public discursive domain. The rawiya personifying this model in the novel is Habiba, the only “principal character” of that novel who is “entirely fictional.”²⁹³ In Djébar’s imagining, one of the women of Madina describes Habiba, “a woman arriving in Madina with no children, with no husband, no nephews,” a woman that, “no one paid attention to” before she took up her role, a “peasant woman,” and “the wanderer to whom we had all become attached.”²⁹⁴ Habiba is also cast as a figure that teeters on the brink of madness. She is deeply attuned to the communal goings on and thus disturbed by the

²⁹⁰ Djébar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, 176-7; *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*.

²⁹¹ Djébar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, 141-2.

²⁹² Djébar, *Far from Madina*, 81.

²⁹³ Djébar points this out in a the list of characters preceding the text of the novel, *Ibid.*, xi.

²⁹⁴ Djébar, *Far From Madina*, 81.

dark cloud over Madina after the Prophet's death...the bloodshed from the continuing Ridda wars, the echo of the piercing accusations from the Prophet's daughter, and an impending feeling of doom foretelling the first fitna.

In Djebbar's rendering, Habiba wandered between the homes of women of the community, and her visits would sometimes spark a gathering and inspire other women to narrate. Djebbar describes Habiba's stay with Safiyya, a revered Companion and paternal aunt of the Prophet, saying that the two prayed and mediated together which had an awakening effect on Safiyya. She *"would suddenly begin to improvise: poems on the bliss of the life hereafter, on the sadness of separation, on expectation of the final hour. Sometimes, it was only two lines, at others, a long stanza with a rapid agitated rhythm"* [italics original]. Djebbar continues:

Habiba would sit motionless, drinking in every word. No sooner had Safiyya finished than she would repeat the last line, beginning to sing it, or rather to chant in a drawn-out moaning...she burned incense. Other women arrived: they spoke of the best known incidents in the Messenger's life [italics original].²⁹⁵

In describing this collective ritual of remembrance, Djebbar also reveals the initiatory aspect of Habiba's role which she characterizes thus, *"for she is borne on by her destiny, which delivers souls and rekindles sleeping inspiration"* [italics original].²⁹⁶ The rawiya did not record memory by the rendering of facts, but by inspiring women to remember and give voice to the past.

Trinh T. Minh-ha has analyzed the dichotomy supposed by mainstream discourse between historical narrative and storytelling, the former often seen as the "accumulation

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 83.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 85.

of facts,” and the latter, “just storytelling.”²⁹⁷ In Minh-ha’s view, such an assessment attempts to mask the many acts of fictionalization, selection and arrangement that are integral to the writing of all historical narrative, a genre whose appearance of factuality rests squarely upon its difference from so-called “storytelling.” In contrast, Minh-ha aligns herself with the storyteller who has embraced truth-telling by abandoning truth as a paradigm. Instead she adopts the position that “truth does not make sense; it exceeds measure. It exceeds all regimes of truth. So, when we insist on telling over and over again, we insist on repetition in re-creation.”²⁹⁸ The rawiyat²⁹⁹ in Djébar’s *Madina* orally relay their stories in a modality that is spontaneous, fluid, and open to collective inflection, in a manner that is in no way measured by conventional standards for truth. This retelling responds to a deeply felt urge on the part of the women of *Madina* to remember the past, not through rigid texts and official accounts, but through an experience of return that seeks and finds what was most essential about those prior times once again. Djébar’s improvisational rendering of this circle of women can be seen as her own endeavor into the circle of storytellers and engagement with their practice of remembering that eschews conventional notions of truth and does not posit a discrete account.

The trajectory of *Far from Madina* points finally to Aisha bint Abi Bakr, the woman who would forge a public role as rawiya and “take up the chain” within the context of mainstream communal memory. The closing chapters of the novel trace

²⁹⁷ Minh-ha, 119-121.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 123.

²⁹⁹ This is the plural, feminine form, female narrators.

experiences from Aisha's young life through the early days as she is becoming a vocal narrator. By no means was Aisha the only woman to perform this role, but she was a pioneer who departed from precedent and would become the most influential and prolific woman to report on and interpret the Prophetic sunna. Like other Medinese women depicted in the novel, Djébar finds Aisha in the company of children, chief among them her nephew, Urwa ibn al-Zubayr, whom she imagines will carry forward the stories of the times she has lived. Aisha, in contemplating this prospect, begins to wonder just what it is that they will recount. Djébar casts Aisha as a source of counter narrative on the Islamic past and as one who interrogated fixed constructions of memory and the behavioral norms and notions of communal identity deriving from them. Djébar's text points to the vital nature of Aisha's relationship to the past as a performative model for living memory and identity.

For Djébar, it is in part out of this questioning that Aisha's sense of purpose is born. It is why she refuses to remain silent and thus embodies a distinct model of female transmitter. Aisha has witnessed firsthand the mistaken application of precedent. At the scene of her father Abu Bakr's death, Umar, the third caliph, forbids the women of the household any rites of mourning. Aisha knows that this is an incorrect interpretation of what the Prophet has said on the issue of lamenting the dead. From the sanctum of her chamber she assures the other mourning women:

Umar ibn al-Khattab is mistaken! In this matter, he has not understood the words of the Messenger – may he be assured of God's salvation! I testify that Muhammad allows us to weep for the one who leaves us, and only forbids loud

shrieks and yelling, and more especially trances and mutilation which may upset the dying man.³⁰⁰

In this moment of tremendous grief, the risk of leaving the matter of interpretation to men such as Umar crystallizes within Aisha. A dormant seed of empowerment, Djébar wonders at this period of gestation, was Aisha “gradually setting herself up as the mouthpiece for the other eight Mothers of the Believers?”³⁰¹ Djébar depicts Aisha’s coming to narration as a kind of activation as she realizes that:

She must provide for the others, she has to keep the memory alive, the long draped ribbon of the actions, words, sighs, smiles of the Messenger – may God’s grace be granted him! Relive the memory for ‘them,’ the Believers.³⁰²

She would go on to carve a space for herself to play out her role as rawiya in the public square. And despite the fact that her reports would be scribed and passed on by male scholars whose editorial work we cannot fully understand, her voice has profoundly impacted the shape of Islamic memory as well as the interpretation of it.

Djébar also presents Aisha’s commitment to taking up the task of narration as fueled on by a deeply-felt urge to return to those days she considered to be the best of her life. Childless and divinely ordered to remain a widow from the age of eighteen, “the memories gnaw at her heart.”³⁰³ According to Djébar, Aisha is called forward by twin impulses, the longing to fulfill her own desire to return, and the resolve to act upon her sense of commitment to her Muslim sisters by preserving the communal vision that was the true legacy of her husband. Aisha is called “to return to the living past – the nine

³⁰⁰ Djébar, *Far from Madina*, 234.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 263.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 267.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 266. The Prophet’s wives were forbidden remarriage in Qur’an 33:53.

years of her married life, of her only love – so that all women too, so that every woman, can move forward into the future.”³⁰⁴ Djebbar muses that Aisha tries to remember everything, that in her eyes no detail is inconsequential, but rather a spark that makes that cherished past live again.

Again returning to a central theme, Djebbar paints the practice of preserving the living past as the distinguishing feature of Aisha’s narrations. Aisha’s, chamber adjoined the communal mosque and she must have overheard the arguments and discussions that prominent community members were engaged in as they sought direction from the precedents of the past after the Prophet’s death. Djebbar suggests how Aisha might have compared her own perspective to those she would have overheard:

...those others, the chatterers, already so sure of their anecdotes...and those who are already forgetting – unaware how unreliable their memories are, how they have grasped nothing of the subtleties.³⁰⁵

The prevailing theme of the novel is again made clear, through Aisha, Djebbar voices the concern that “the others’ will eclipse this past glowing with life, they will harden the molten ore, they will transmute into cold lead the skin and sinews of bygone lofty passions...” In the figure of Aisha, Djebbar places the urge to transmit the past in a way that does not assume it has crystallized into a definitive set of facts and prohibitions, but instead in a way that prevents the past from becoming a regulatory force. Aisha’s relationship to memory cannot be simply externalized and recorded; rather, it always

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 268.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 274.

involves the act of return. Aisha must give voice to a past that lives within her through continuous engagement in the performative act of narration.

She recalls. She relives. She remembers....she finds the words: words which do not swaddle the past days, no, which strip them bare. Sentences which do not harden into formulas: which remain poetry.

Because Aisha does not settle for a final interpretation, she keeps the past alive. Djébar insists that there is no fabrication in this inspired process. “She recounts. She narrates. She invents nothing: she recreates.”³⁰⁶

LINKING AISHA BINT ABI BAKR AND ASSIA DJEBAR

Djébar sketches Aisha’s effort to narrate the past in language that echoes how she thinks of and describes her own process of narrating the novel. In the foreword to *Far from Madina*, Djébar admits she must rely on fiction to bring scenes from the past to life, but as with Aisha, Djébar insists that she has not misrepresented the past. In an interview discussing the work and the sources she drew upon, Djébar states, “All one has to do is go and *read* [italics original]: I made up nothing.”³⁰⁷ These seemingly contradictory statements find their resolution in the author’s insistence on a model of truth that cannot be found in narratives claiming to have correctly ordered and retold the one true account of the past. While Djébar has been to some degree faithful to the history recorded in medieval texts preserving the fragments of Islam’s early women whose stories’ she narrates, her own model of truth requires that she take the imaginative leap to return to

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 275.

³⁰⁷ Zimra, “When the Past Answers the Present,” 128.

these women and say more about them. Male scribes were blind to the agency of these women, this blindness points Djébar to areas of exploration. Djébar will not paint an alternative story of the past because she recognizes and affirms the incompleteness of any attempt to fix it. Instead, Djébar establishes an emotional connection to the traces of Islam's early women, and empowers them to speak and act, layering voices and probing variations to arrive at a basic truth: the arc of these women's lives exceeded the narrow confines of their brief appearances in the classical texts. Djébar resurrects these figures so that they might live again in Islamic memory and so that their stories might continue to be told. Minh-ha has written:

What is transmitted from generation to generation is not only the stories, but the very power of transmission. The stories are highly inspiring, and so is she, the untiring storyteller. She, who suffocates the codes of lie and truth...To preserve is to pass on, not to keep for oneself.³⁰⁸

In this light, Djébar's narrative has the effect of cutting off the dead branches of these women's stories, where their tales ended in silence, in order to enable regeneration and new growth.

There are numerous parallels to be drawn between the author, Djébar, and the narrator she has narrated, Aisha bint Abi Bakr. In drawing Aisha as the consummate transmitter of living memory, Djébar also points to the power of transmission in the writing of her own novel. Djébar places a quote from the French historian Jules Michelet before the opening pages of the novel: "And then a strange dialogue was engaged between them and myself, between me, who restored them to life, and those old

³⁰⁸ Minh-ha, 134.

times set back on their feet.”³⁰⁹ With this quote Djébar clearly acknowledges that in writing the book she has created connection between herself and the women in the stories. Another way that we see Djébar and the Aïsha she has drawn in conversation with one another is in what motivated them both to speak up. Djébar is moved, like (this) Aïsha, to narrate in order to challenge constructions of communal memory and identity in a milieu where tolerance for women’s visibility was in decline. While Aïsha is called to the memory of her husband, his nuanced positions and sense that more guidance could come at any time, Djébar is propelled forward in her project by textual evidence preserving a memory of the Islamic past where women enjoyed a degree of mobility and influence that the Islamist regimes of her day threatened to narrow. Speaking of her native Algeria she Djébar states:

The shock was the riots of ’88, blood flowing in the street...I told myself that the only possible response for me, as a writer, was to go back and plunge myself again into the original texts [sources], to study this very period of our history that the fundamentalists were in the process of claiming for themselves [annexing], and that they were defacing, in fact as well as in thought/intent.³¹⁰

In this double rendering, both Aïsha and Djébar answer the call of duty they feel toward Muslim women, and for Djébar also out of a duty to a diverse Muslim community. For both of the women, narration is an act of solidarity.

Like Aïsha, Djébar is also called to return to the past out of a personal longing. Djébar began to study the source materials drawn upon for the project of *Far from*

³⁰⁹ Djébar, *Far from Madina*, xvii.

³¹⁰ Zimra, “Not so Far from Madina,” 825.

Madina long before it occurred to her to narrate this past in the form of a novel. She states:

As early as 1985, I had started to reread (and think about) historians of early Islam. I had even considered writing on these particular events, but the project had remained purely personal. What triggered my interest was that I had noticed ‘blanks’ in these texts....regarding the role of women.³¹¹

Djebar populates these lacunae with story elements deriving from her creative imagination as well as from her past. Djebar inscribes elements of her own biography and personal experience of Islamic culture, drawing on the stories she heard as a child and revisiting her earliest memories of an emotional connection to the faith. In *Fantasia*, Djebar recalls the story her aunts used to tell about Khadija, the Prophet’s first wife, how she comforted him when he trembled in fear after having received the first verses of Qur’an, and how after her death, the sound of the footsteps of her sister brought the Prophet “uncontrollable distress” because it caused him to remember her so vividly.³¹² This story, featuring the tenderness and deep conjugal love shared between the Prophet and his wife “would bring on a sudden yearning for Islam” within Djebar.

Love is also what characterizes Djebar’s earliest memory of “religious feeling” that came from her encounter with the “The Ballad of Abraham,” a song she would hear on the radio each year around the time of the “feast of the sheep” as Muslims celebrated the faithfulness of the Prophet Abraham and the mercy of his lord. Without knowing why, Djebar was captivated by the song and the sense she received from it, the Prophet’s mixture of anguish and faith as he moved to carry out his lord’s command to sacrifice his

³¹¹ Zimra, “When the Past Answers our Present,” 122

³¹² Djebar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, 169-172.

son, the dignity and clarity of the Prophet, his son, and his wife. Retracing this memory, Djebbar points to the fact that through music she was able to establish an emotional, visceral connection to her Islamic faith while side stepping the rigid, rule-ridden, and hierarchical ordering that characterized her interactions with doctrine and official forms of religious observation. She states:

Every gathering, for a funeral, for a wedding, is subject to rigid rules and the separation of the sexes must be rigorously respected, care must be taken that no male relative sees you.

Veils, small corners in the mosque, the pressure on women to remain out of sight, all point to the experience of alienation for Djebbar. She states:

In the transmission of Islam, an acid erosion has been at work: Tradition would seem to decree that entry through its strait gate is by submission, not by love. Love, which the most simple setting might inflame, appears dangerous. There remains music.³¹³

Music, a forbidden pastime according to some Islamic authorities, thus became one of the modes through which Djebbar experienced a passionate, subversive relationship to Islam. It likewise came to inform Djebbar's thinking on the alterity, creativity and fluidity that characterized her relationship to the past, to her Muslim identity and the manner in which she would narrate that connection.

In *Far from Madina*, Djebbar follows her desire to return and "to dwell" in the chorus of voices, the oral tradition of the women of the first community.³¹⁴ Through this return Djebbar reestablishes her connection to Islam, past, present and future. By her

³¹³ It is interesting to note that the version of the story of Abraham told in the song that Djebbar conjures is the Judeo-Christian version that refers to the prophet as Abraham, rather than the Islamic Ibrahim, and retells the drama as though the son to be sacrificed is Isaac the son of Sarah. In the Qur'an and in Islamic tradition, these events instead are told around the figure of Ishmael, Ibrahim's son by Hajar.

³¹⁴ Djebbar, *Far from Madina*, xv.

narration of this return, she opens up this mode of relating for the wider community. In an interview, Djébar states:

As for me, a novelist who claims French as my culture—if I may put it this way—but Islam as my religion, to go back to religious subjects became a way to grow back roots, a pure pleasure, but not in order to go religious [literally “do religion,” i.e. proselytize]. Simply put [I wanted] to give all these extraordinary characters [personages] back to us: to bring to life, in fact as in thought, those men and those women who live on in the collective memory of the humblest of our people and who, for our people, continue to be very present [i.e., very much alive] among us.³¹⁵

In order to overcome her feeling of exile from Islam, an exile created by the westernization that her body and mind has undergone, an exile resulting from her experience of the orthodox institution of Islam as loveless and juridical, Djébar must re-inhabit her relation to Islam and transmit that experience, thereby inscribing her unique embodiment of Muslim identity through the narration of her subversive inhabiting of the past.

Paradoxically, in order to enable the view on the Islamic past and the mode of Islamic identity that Djébar is committed to conveying through the writing of the novel, conventional notions of seeing and constructs of identity must be dispensed with. Among the conventions to be set aside is the notion of an author’s separate status from her text. Instead, the storyteller must mingle with the story she tells. Djébar is insinuated into the text because only by inhabiting this domain can she hope to narrate the story in a way that does not objectify and harden the vitality of this past. Likewise, it is only by ceasing to approach the text as the product of an author positing a specific version of the

³¹⁵ Zimra, “Not so Far from Madina,” 827-828.

past and instead approaching it as a narrative performance of a “subject-in-the-making” who is enacting a living relationship to the past that we as readers enable the realization of Djébar’s project.³¹⁶ Again, Minh-ha’s thinking elucidates Djébar’s poetics. Minh-ha’s view echoes that of Judith Butler, the illusion of the unified self is but another product of the desire for mastery which through the ordering operation of language seeks to assign true origins and final meanings, urges made strong by our collective “fear of nonsense.”³¹⁷ The alternative is to embrace a plural paradigm of identity that is always in-the-making with the principle of difference as its only essential characteristic. Minh-ha states, “Difference in such an insituable context is *that which undermines the very idea of identity* [italics original], deferring to infinity the layers whose totality form ‘I.’”³¹⁸ Djébar’s insistence on preserving the living past embraces this notion that its identity will always be deferred. In Djébar’s view, in order to construct a truthful relationship to memory one must engage vitally with it and abandon expectations of establishing a final account or a fixed relationship to it. Minh-ha and Butler’s theories help us to see that as these fixed relations unravel, so also do the moorings for static notions of identity and selfhood.

The larger truth to be found in *Far from Madina*’s narration rests in the fact that Djébar’s unique and authentically lived relationship to Islamic memory is performed and made manifest through it. The novel continually points to the idea that it is through the

³¹⁶ Acknowledging Kristeva’s coinage of this term, Minh-ha uses it in her own work to designate a notion of subjecthood that requires the “dismantling of the sovereign, authority-claiming subject” and that can never be fully defined or represented, Minh-ha, 102-103.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 94

³¹⁸ Ibid., 96

narration of the past, the narration of one's life, that articulations of identity come in to circulation. In *Far from Madina* Djebbar foregrounds the struggle that early Muslims faced after the death of their leader. During Muhammad's lifetime, the Muslims followed his unfolding, living light of guidance. Upon his death, the center having given way, those guiding the community sought to fix the obligations, the parameters, and in a sense, the boundaries of communal identity. Djebbar's approach to the past seeks to undermine the fixing of hierarchies and the adoption of "authentic" categories of identity. Djebbar's work instead suggests that this old way of adhering to categories as a way of belonging is a false belonging. She demonstrates through her characters' narrations of the past and through her own engaged revisiting of the past that a living account, a living relationship is the only authentic and truthful relationship. The message of the novel is that one must endeavor to authentically recount the past and that to do so one must also abandon expectations of final answers and fixed identity. Djebbar's text is an act of engagement that offers an opportunity for her readers to explore a new relationship to the Islamic past. It may also be considered an act of *ijtihad*, a reinterpretation of tradition that Djebbar undertakes in defiance of rules and boundaries that historically reserved the practice for elite male scholars. Djebbar restores the female figures of early Islam not only to communal memory but also to imagination. Through *Far from Madina*, the reader sees out through the eyes of these women and sees an Islam that includes them and all their desires and their yearnings.³¹⁹ While Djebbar is firmly committed to contesting

³¹⁹ Sa'diyya Shaikh raises the concern, "while it is standard that early and medieval Islamic thought was often based on the presumption that the normative being at the center of religious discourse was male, it is imperative to explore and problematize the pervasiveness of these assumptions in contemporary Muslim

canonical depictions that have downplayed and painted as passive this collective of vibrant women, the point of the novel is not merely to forward a specific, oppositional version of the events. What is most essential is Djebbar's mode of transmitting a new relationship to the past, and the proposition that this engagement is the most authentic and truthful mode of communal belonging.

Her story overflows the boundaries of patriarchal time and truth. It overflows the notion of story as a finished product ("just a story") ...what is important...is to (re-)tell the story as she thinks it should be told; in other words, to maintain the difference that allows (her) truth to live on.³²⁰

thought" and that "it is vital that Muslim scholarship consciously transform the human persona at the center of religious thought so as to include the experiences and realities of women." It is my view that Djebbar's *Far from Madina* contributes meaningfully to this project. Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Knowledge, Women and Gender in Hadith: a Feminist Interpretation," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15:1 (Jan 2004): 107.

³²⁰Minh-ha, 149-50.

Conclusion

In this study I set out to examine Assia Djébar's *Far from Madina* through the lens of subversive female Muslim identity and "lived Islam" that is suggested by the text. In order to make this way of seeing and mode of identity legible, it was necessary to examine the way that Djébar's novel employs critique, fictionalization and de-centering narrative techniques to challenge dominant strands of historical discourse and to destabilize marginalizing paradigms of female Muslim identity and regimes of gender hierarchy encoded within them. I argued that Djébar created *Far from Madina* to produce an open-ended range of possibilities for female Muslim identity and that this so-called work of literary fiction functions as a legitimate source of historical counter/narrative. In the act of writing *Far from Madina* for contemporary audiences, Djébar contests the legitimacy of constructions of female Muslim identity found in classical Islamic historiographical narrative, contemporary Algerian nationalist discourse, and Western/colonial discourse. Djébar articulates a vision of the women of Islam's first community as active and engaged, retelling episodes that appear in historical chronicles through their eyes, with attention to their motivations and desires. Djébar foregrounds vocal, empowered women who contested prevailing authority and positions them as exemplars for all Muslim women. While the novel does not posit a particular, alternative narrative of the Islamic past, this polyphonic retelling undermines the legitimacy of any singular authoritative retelling that might serve as the basis of fixed paradigms of identity, and especially those which seek to legitimate codes of strict control over Muslim women.

Djebar appropriates canonical narratives of the early Islamic past and positions her critique of constructions of female Muslim identity as a project of revision originating from within the faith. Although Djebar is writing in French from a position of exile, she does not posit a critique that privileges westernization or secularization, but rather takes as an ideal her own vision of the Prophet's example. Djebar's gesture to this past is an expression of her personal desire to connect to the memories and the figures of those times. When she engages with classical Sunni sources, Djebar finds on one hand, depictions that suggest to her wider parameters of social space and agency for Muslim women than Orientalizing accounts or Islamist discourse of her day afforded women. On the other hand, Djebar found "blanks"³²¹ when it came to the stories of these women that exposed the tendency of early Muslim scribes to fall silent on the perspectives and experiences of Islam's first women. Djebar seized upon these open spaces in discourse and turned to fiction in order to explore the "missing pieces" within narratives of the Islamic past in order to make the revered female figures "live again."³²² In so doing, Djebar challenged the construction of early Muslim women as silent and disempowered. To address these silences and give life to this past, Djebar lent her voice to the process of narrating early Muslim women's experiences, inserting her creative vision into the scribal legacy of communal Muslim memory. This act can be seen at once as a performance of Djebar's solidarity with the women in her community of faith and as an expression of her personal engagement, acts which simultaneously construct her as a Muslim subject and as

³²¹ Zimra, "Not so Far from Medina," 122.

³²² Zimra, "When the Past Answers the Present," 122.

the novel's narrator. It is from the gaze of this narrator that readers of *Far from Madina* are afforded the opportunity to look anew at the early Islamic past through the mode of female Muslim identity that Djebbar has re-inscribed upon it by way of her own looking.

In order to explicate the nature of the view constructed by Djebbar's narration of the Islamic past, I called on Judith Butler's theoretical work and her formulation of performative identity. According to this position, once one accepts that identity categories are always incomplete and in a continuous process of negotiation, the way is open for a new paradigm of identity. This alternative notion of identity is not defined by normative constraints, but is instead made up of all performances appealing to an identity category as well as performances by bodies and minds that are inscribed with its cultural and religious legacies, gestures and signs. Disparate and harmonizing performances taken together erode the primacy and authority posited by any single normative construction of identity. For Butler, the application of this concept is at first focused on gender identity and then extended to wider categories of communal identity. In *Far from Madina*, Djebbar calls for a lived relation to memory, embodied by the act of narration, and embraces the modes of female Muslim identity that come into being through this relation. The application of this formulation of identity can naturally be extended to reshape the wider concept of communal Muslim identity. This performative or lived paradigm advances the view that not only are collective identity categories plural and destabilized, but that following the same line of thought, individual identity and subjecthood are revealed to be plural and unstable as well.

It is through the model of narration and the relationship Djebbar describes between *Far from Madina*'s narrators and the past that a vision of female Muslim identity that is not fixed, but rather continuously constructed, comes into view and is consciously embraced. According to Djebbar, the narrator "*par excellence*" makes the past "live again," not through the perfect capturing of a fixed image or a statement of objective facts, but by taking up the chain of solidarity, the chain of storytelling, and re-engaging the figures of the past through the re-telling of their stories.³²³ From this perspective, Djebbar too is insinuated as one of the narrators of *Far from Madina*. In my analysis, I drew upon the theoretical work of Trinh T. Minh-ha to explicate the manner in which Djebbar's narration told the story of the women of the Islamic past through the paradigm of difference, or in Djebbar's language, "living truth." According to Minh-ha, one must find a way of speaking that subverts all the regimes of truth encoded in language and our typical ways of speaking. Chief among her concerns is that no binary relationship be posited between the writer and her story. The writer or narrator must affirm multiple identity and give herself to the story, enter into it, and affirm that she too is created by her act of narration. Speaking of the storyteller, Minh-ha states, "The entire being is engaged in the act of speaking-listening-weaving-perceiving. If she does not cry she will turn to stone."³²⁴

The text of *Far from Madina* represents Djebbar's vital engagement with the past, her careful historical research into classical Islamic texts brought to life through her

³²³ Djebbar, *Far from Madina*, 266.

³²⁴ Minh-ha, 127.

passion, her creative forces and acts of fictionalization. The truth that Djébar reveals through *Far from Madina* is not to be found in the specific details of the story. The truth resides in the “lived” relationship to the past that is narrated. Djébar’s authentic engagement with the past is a reinterpretation that spurs new life for those figures that were silenced in classical narrative. Djébar’s rendering of these figures in the novel allows them to “live again” in the imagination and in collective memory. Through this novel, the reader of the text is also pulled into the process of this remaking, offered the opportunity to relate to Islamic history in a new way. Djébar’s re-visions bring attention to examples of women in canonical Sunni literature whose experiences offer grounds for contesting particular discourses on ideal female Muslim identity and related codes of behavioral and mental control. At the same time, the work of *Far from Madina* asserts a more wide-ranging re-thinking of Islamic identity. Djébar’s critique is aimed at undermining the legitimacy of fixed modes of identification and notions of authenticity derived from them. Conscious that all acts of narration construct social meaning, this work suggests that authenticity is only attained by engaging vitally with one’s relationship to Islam by consciously narrating and affirming one’s relationship to memory, forms and essence.

There has been a tendency in scholarship around Djébar’s work to give less attention to her identity as a Muslim woman. My analysis treats Djébar’s identification as a Muslim woman as central. My aim was not to engage in a discussion of the traits that constitute Djébar as a Muslim, but rather to theorize this Muslim identity as a way of being and a way of seeing. Bringing this approach to bare on a project such as Djébar’s,

which aims to demystify fixed notions of memory and identity as well as the institutions of authority based upon them, it was my aim to foreground in her work how Muslim identity serves as a site of difference and functions as a liberating force. It is my own view that Djébar's *Far from Madina* points to a neglected area of exploration in literary studies and in the consideration of communal Muslim identity, the phenomenon of "lived Islam." By this term I mean a mode of affirming one's relationship to Islam (belonging) that eschews the acceptance of hegemonic forms of belonging and the binary discourses that this belonging is often perceived through. The mode of belonging put forward by Djébar's novel privileges solidarity and authentic, vital engagement above all else. Djébar describes her own desire to reassert her relation to the Islamic past as "a longing to embark as a on a love affair, a rustling catching in my heart: with fervor and taking all the risks of blasphemy."³²⁵ In my view, this concept of "lived Islam" and the phenomenon of Muslim identity articulated through the difference deserve further attention.

³²⁵ Djébar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, 172.

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